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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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A Deadly Blonde and Blackmail Complicate Shayne's Newest Case

"It's not the kind of case I'd ordinarily consider," Mike said. "But I'm prejudiced against letting an innocent man be a patsy—for a vicious assemblage of pack-rats."

Bullet for a Blonde

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE BLONDE SEATED in the front booth of the Merchant's Bar had a heart-shaped face, and the build of a European movie temptress. Except that her expression of placid bovinity suggested borderline intelligence at best, she was stunningly beautiful. Every male eye in the place had touched her at least once, and several lingered with furtive estimation.

No one attempted an advance, though. In the first place the Merchant's Bar was primarily a stag place where men congregated to escape women, rather than to pick them up. In the second place the expectant manner in which she glanced at the door each time it opened suggested she was waiting for someone.

At ten after five a tall, sandy-haired young man with a pleasant but unhandsome face entered. The blonde's expression of satisfaction indicated it was his arrival she had been expecting, but she gave him no greeting. Like every man who entered, he gave her an appreciative glance, then his eyes moved away with no sign of recognition.

After merely standing for a moment thankfully absorbing the air-

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A

COMPLETE NEW

MIKE SHAYNE

NOVELET

conditioned atmosphere of the place, the young man moved to the bar and took a stool. His seersucker suit had the shapeless look of having been worn all day in an unair-conditioned office, yet somehow he still managed to look neat, probably because there was an air of such immaculate cleanliness about him. The blonde's gaze rested on him approvingly as he ordered and drank a beer.

He had only one beer, then rose from his stool to leave. The blonde rose at the same moment, left a bill lying on the table and reached the street door just ahead of him. Outside she turned right and clicked rapidly along the sidewalk on high heels. He turned in the same direction, moving at a more leisurely pace, until a gap of several yards separated them.

At the corner she halted for a red light and a moment later he halted beside her. She glanced sidewise at him, provocatively, and was nettled to see he wasn't even looking at her. His attention was on the red light.

When it changed, he stepped from the curb still without paying any attention to her. She hurried to catch up, regaining his side at the opposite curb.

"Mr. Ahern?" she said a little breathlessly.

Pausing, he looked down at her in surprise. A flicker of recognition in his eyes suggested he recalled seeing her in the bar but otherwise couldn't place her.

"Yes?" he said uncertainly.

"You don't know me," she said. "I'm Polly Varden. A girl who works for the same modeling agency I do pointed you out to me."

"Oh?" he inquired, waiting puzzledly.

"You may not know her by name, but she used to work in the office across from yours before she took up modeling. Mary James."

"Umm," he said thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Afraid it doesn't ring a bell."

"A pretty girl," she prompted. "Brunette, about five feet four."

He gave his head another shake, this time slightly amused.

She looked a little forlorn. "If you don't remember her, I guess we're not really introduced."

"You shouldn't suffer for my poor memory," he said with a straight face. "Consider us introduced."

Her face lighted up. "Mary said you were a good sport."

He contemplated her warily. "Uh-huh. What was it you wanted, Miss—ah—"

"Varden. Polly Varden." She smiled up at him. "I wanted to meet you."

His eyebrows raised and he said dryly, "I'm flattered. I'm also married. Very happily."

A fleeting expression of surprise crossed her face. She wasn't used

to rejection by men. But it didn't throw her at a loss. She switched so subtly, he wasn't aware it was a switch.

"You think I'm trying to pick you up!" she said with a tinkling little laugh.

He flushed, abruptly thrown on the defensive. If she hadn't been, he thought guiltily, she must think him an egotistical idiot.

She saved him the embarrassment of stammering out a denial by saying, "You're an accountant, aren't you?"

He admitted he was.

"Mary says you do income taxes in your spare time."

"Yes," he admitted again.

"Well, that's what I want with you," she said, clasping her hands and staring up at him so trustingly, he wondered why he had imagined a flirtatious look in her eyes a moment before. "The government says my last return is all wrong. The whole thing has to be done over. Mary says you're real good."

"Oh," he said. "Who made it out the first time?"

"I did. It's mainly deductions. Being a model, I claimed all my clothes as a business deduction. Now they say I can't. How much do you charge for making out a tax return?"

"Depends on the work involved. Most of my clients run around twenty-five dollars."

"Oh, that's reasonable," she said, and started to open her bag.

"You can pay when I finish the work," he said with a smile. "You want to drop your records off at my office tomorrow?"

"Couldn't you pick them up tonight?" she asked quickly. "I'm leaving town for a few days at six in the morning."

He glanced at his watch. "I could get them now, if it isn't too far. I'm about due home for dinner, though."

"I'm not going home now," she said. "I'm having dinner out with a friend. I'll be home by nine P.M., though. Could you stop by then?"

"I suppose," he said, glancing at his watch again. "What's the address?"

At exactly nine P.M., Tom Ahern parked in front of an apartment building that was sleek and modern. In the vestibule he ran his finger along the cards below the mail slots until he found one

which was hand lettered in ink: *Miss Polly Varden, Apt. 2-D.*

He took the stairs to the second floor. As soon as he disappeared around the first turn, a man who had been leaning against the wall beneath the stairs, out of sight of the front entrance, moved forward to the mail slots. Lifting the card lettered *Miss Polly Varden* from its holder, he dropped it in his pocket. A printed card beneath it said *Miss Susan Crane.*

Quietly the man left the building and sauntered leisurely up the street.

The blonde Ahern had met that afternoon opened the door the instant he rang the bell of apartment 2-D. She wore a light print dress with a demurely high neck and elbow-length sleeves. She gave him an impersonally friendly smile and stepped aside to let him in.

Clicking shut the door, she said, "I'll get my records," and disappeared through what seemed to be a bedroom door. The door closed behind her.

Ahern stood idly looking around at the well-furnished living room. The furnishings suggested both money and taste. Then his brow furrowed in puzzlement and he cocked his head to listen as the sound of tearing cloth came from beyond the closed bedroom door.

It came again, then a third time. He was just about to cross to the door, knock and inquire if anything was the matter when it opened.

He stared in astonishment at the figure in the doorway. The woman's blonde hair was dishevelled. Lipstick was smeared from her mouth halfway across her face. The front of her dress was ripped in several places and the center strap of her brassier had burst, so that her semi-nudity was not in any way masked.

But the most astonishing thing was the complete placidity of her expression. She was even smiling a little as she crossed the room toward him.

He stood with his mouth hanging open as she stopped only a foot away. Casually she raised her hands and raked fingernails down both of his cheeks. As he reeled away, she grabbed a double-handful of material and ripped his shirt wide open with a powerful tug. Then she threw her arms about his neck, skillfully kicked one foot from under him to throw him off balance, and twisted so that they both fell heavily to the sofa.

With her arms clamped vise-like about his neck as he struggled to get up, she began emitting terror-stricken screams.

He didn't hear the door she had thoughtfully left unlocked slam open. He couldn't have heard the trumpet of doom about the screeching in his ear. The first he was aware of others in the room was

when hands roughly jerked him to his feet by both arms.

A tall, bald-headed man clamped his right arm. A stocky youth of about twenty had a wrist lock on his left. Both were in shirt sleeves. From the doorway a mixture of other tenants, both men and women, were peering into the apartment.

Ahern was conscious of blood running down his face from the fingernail scratches. He stared down stupidly at the blonde on the sofa, who lay breathing harshly and glaring up at him with loathing.

"He broke in," she said in a high, thin voice. "I don't even know him. He—" Her voice sank to an agonized whisper. "He—attacked me."

Both men's grips tightened on Ahern's arms. A low growl came from the stocky youth's throat. He drove a fist into Ahern's stomach.

As Ahern gasped and doubled up, the bald man said sharply, "That's enough of that, Joey. We'll let the cops handle this."

II

LUCY HAMILTON closed the door of Michael Shayne's private office behind her and said, "There's a woman outside crying to see you, Michael."

The lanky redhead raised shaggy eyebrows. "Crying to see me?"

"I mean she's crying and she wants to see you," Lucy amended. "I didn't mean wanting to see you made her cry. It could happen, though, I suppose."

Shayne grunted. "For a minute you had me guessing. Who is she and what's she want?"

"She's Mrs. Myra Ahern, and it's about her husband. She says he's in jail for something he didn't do."

Shayne said, "When she stops crying, send her in."

Apparently the warning was not needed, for only a minute elapsed before the door opened again. A tall, well-formed brunette in her early twenties entered. Her eyes were red and her expression woe-

ful, but she was no longer weeping.

When she was settled in a chair and had refused the detective's offer of a cigarette, she said in a small voice, "Your secretary says you don't like weeping women, Mr. Shayne. I'll try not to cry."

"It might get things accomplished faster," Shayne said dryly. "What's your problem, Mrs. Ahern?"

She looked as though she was on the verge of bursting into tears again, but managed to conquer the emotion. "It's my husband. He's been arrested on a charge of rape."

The redhead hiked his eyebrows. "Is he guilty?"

"Of course not!" she said indignantly. "Tom doesn't even look at other women. He happens to be in love with me. It's a deliberate frame."

Shayne said, "Suppose you tell me the whole story."

With an effort Myra Ahern composed herself. "It happened last night. Tom is an accountant for the Forbes Auditing Company, and on the side he does some income tax work. Last night after dinner he said he had to pick up some records from a new client, and went out about eight thirty. The next I heard from him was a call from police headquarters at ten thirty. He was in jail. I went right down there and they let me see him. He looked awful. His clothes were all torn and his face scratched."

Her lips began to tremble and Shayne said quietly, "More crying is only going to delay matters."

The woman squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. "A woman named Susan Crane brought the charge. She claims he forced his way into her apartment and attacked her." Her voice turned reluctant. "Neighbors broke in when she screamed. Her clothing was all torn too."

Shayne frowned and tugged at his left earlobe. "How does your husband explain that?"

"He says *she* did the attacking. She deliberately tore her own clothing, pretended to struggle with him, scratched his face, tore his shirt and screamed."

"Hmm," Shayne said doubtfully. "He have any theory as to why?"

She shook her head. "Tom says she stopped him on the street a little after five and introduced herself. She claimed a mutual acquaintance had recommended him as a tax expert and she needed some income tax help. He arranged to pick up her records that evening. When he arrived at the appointed time, this happened. And now she says she never saw him before he broke into her apartment."

The redhead gave his earlobe another tug. "The story doesn't make much sense," he said. "Maybe because I'm hearing about it

secondhand. I'd better run down to headquarters and get your husband's version."

An hour later, at police headquarters, Shayne found Chief Will Gentry reading reports in his office. The burly police officer glanced up with a frown at the interruption when his door opened. Then his face cleared and his usual dour expression relaxed into a smile.

"Morning, Mike," he said, pushing aside the stack of reports.

The lanky redhead took a chair, and lit a cigarette with slow deliberation. He said, "You have a suspect named Ahern booked for rape, Will. Can I see him?"

Gentry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What's your interest in a thing like that, Mike? It's a pretty open and shut case."

"It's not the kind of case I'd ordinarily consider. But I've a weakness for helping an innocent man get the evidence he'll need to clear himself. His wife claims it's a frame."

Gentry shrugged. "So does Ahern. But he was caught in the act."

"Literally?" Shayne asked sharply.

"Well, not in the physical act itself. His clothing wasn't disarranged, except for a torn shirt. But hers was, and she claims he rearranged his own clothes just as neighbors burst in. He *was* holding her down on a sofa and struggling with her."

"She claims it was more than just *attempted* rape?"

Gentry nodded.

"She have a medical examination?"

The chief nodded again. "Of course. But as you know, there's no way to tell for sure with an adult woman who has had marital or non-marital experience. So it boils down to his word against hers."

The chief shook his head. "Not quite. Why should she lie? It's a lost cause, but you can talk to him if you want."

Picking up his desk phone, he ordered the suspect brought to his office.

"What makes you so sure Ahern's lying?" Shayne asked. "According to his wife, he claims this Susan Crane did the attacking."

"Yeah," Gentry said dryly. "Makes sense for a woman to attack a man who forces his way into her apartment, doesn't it?"

"He says he didn't force his way in. He had an appointment to pick up some tax records."

"Uh-huh. Only there weren't any records in the apartment. My men looked. And Ahern couldn't even tell the arresting officers her name. That fact alone would have made his story unbelievable."

Shayne elevated his eyebrows again. "Mrs. Ahern didn't mention that."

"She probably didn't know it.

We only gave her ten minutes with him. He kept insisting the woman's name was Polly Varden. Claimed that name was even listed on the mailbox for her apartment. But the arresting officers checked, and the card read Susan Crane. Nobody but Ahern ever heard of Polly Varden."

Shayne was still mulling this over when a uniformed officer brought in Tom Ahern. He was a tall, pleasant looking man with an air of neatness about him despite a torn shirt and unshaven cheeks. He didn't wear a sullen look most arrested felons assume, Shayne noted. He just looked bewildered.

After introducing himself, Shayne asked the man to repeat his story of the previous night's events. Ahern took it from the moment he had been stopped on the street by the woman who claimed to be Polly Varden to the moment of his arrest.

When he finished, the redhead regarded him thoughtfully for some time. Finally he said, "Any idea why this woman gave you a fake name?"

Ahern said, "I've been thinking about that all night. The only reason I can think of is that she wanted to make sure my story would sound phony. See how bad it looks that I didn't know her real name? Somebody changed that mailbox card after I got there. It was a deliberate frame."

"Why?" Shayne asked.

Ahern gave a hopeless shrug. "I don't know why, Mr. Shayne. I never saw the woman before she stopped me on the street. I can't figure what she has against me."

"Maybe she was just a hired accessory," the redhead suggested. "Any reason you can think of why anyone else would want you out of circulation for a time?"

Before Ahern could reply, Will Gentry said, "You sound as though you believe his story, Mike."

Shayne regarded him moodily. "I do, Will. It's too pat." He turned back to Ahern. "Well?"

Ahern gave another hopeless shrug. "I'm not important enough for anyone to go to all that bother to get rid of me. The only effect my arrest will have on anybody is to make somebody else take over my work at the office until this is cleared up."

Shayne's eyes brightened. "What work were you doing?"

"Making an annual audit. That's our main business—running audits of company and corporation books. I've been doing the Mitchell Development account."

"The real estate outfit?"

Ahern nodded. "We do their books every year."

"Don't they have their own bookkeepers?"

"Of course," Ahern said. "But like most corporations, their charter calls for an independent audit once a year by an outside account-

ing firm. That assures the stockholders that everything is on the up-and-up."

"Hmm," Shayne said. "And now you won't be able to finish the audit."

"Someone else in my company will, though. There's nothing there. Getting me out of the way won't stop the audit."

"I'll look into it as a start anyway," Shayne said. Rising, he punched out his cigarette in Gentry's ash tray. "See you around."

"Is there any chance of my getting out on bond?" Ahern asked.

Will Gentry growled. "In Florida rape is a capital offence."

Shayne said, "I don't think it will do you much good, but I'll send you a lawyer, if you want."

Ahern considered, then shook his head. "If I can't get bond, there's no point. We'll wait to see what you turn up. I'd appreciate it if you'd ask my wife to bring me some clean clothes and toilet articles, though."

Shayne nodded. "I'll phone her."

He nodded again, this time to Will Gentry, and strode out the door.

III

THE FORBES Auditing Company was in downtown Miami only a few blocks from Michael Shayne's Flagler Street office. Beyond a wooden railing there were about a dozen desks containing adding machines, all vacant. The only person in sight was an attractive redheaded receptionist just inside the railed enclosure. She looked up at the detective with a professional client-greeting smile.

"Holiday?" Shayne inquired, gazing about at the empty desks.

She looked puzzled, then followed his gaze and her smile widened. "Oh, no. It's usually like this. Our staff does most of its work at the offices of the companies whose books they are auditing. We see them for about five minutes in the morning. What can I do for you, sir?"

"Mr. Forbes in?"

"Yes, sir, but he's in conference at the moment. Who shall I say wants to see him?"

"Michael Shayne."

The girl's eyes grew large. "The private detective?"

"Uh-huh."

"I've read lots about you," she said enthusiastically. "Wait till I tell George I met you. Will he be jealous."

"George?"

"My boy friend." Then her expression turned contemplative. "I'll bet you're here about Tom Ahern. I've seen the morning paper."

"You guessed it," Shayne said. "Will you announce me to Mr. Forbes?"

"Wasn't that awful?" she said. "And to think how many times

I've been alone here in the office with Tom. It makes me shudder."

"You think he's guilty?"

She looked surprised at the question. "No woman would claim a thing like that if it weren't true." she said with conviction.

That was the trouble with a rape case, Shayne thought glumly. In the public mind a man accused of such a crime was automatically guilty without trial, because no one could imagine any woman deliberately facing the cruel publicity which would follow unless she had actually been attacked. He wondered how many innocent men were rotting away in prison because juries had accepted without question the accusations of vindictive women who had never been touched.

The girl picked up her phone, spoke into it briefly and set it down again. "He says to come right in," she said. "I guess Mr. Mitchell and the other men are leaving."

Shayne pricked up his ears. "Mitchell of the Mitchell Development Company?"

She nodded. "That door there," she said, pointing to a door across the room marked: *Private*.

Shayne pushed through the wooden gate and crossed the room to the indicated door. Opening it, he walked into a small, plainly furnished office. A slim, gray-haired man of about sixty sat behind the desk. Standing by the window was a heavily-muscled man in his forties with a wide, rock-jawed face and piercing blue eyes. A tall, thin, gangling man with a pointed nose and horn-rimmed glasses stood by the desk putting papers into a brief case.

Rising stiffly, the gray-haired man held out his hand and introduced himself as Burgett Forbes.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Shayne," he said in a reserved voice. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He introduced the heavily-muscled man as Gerald Mitchell and the thin man as Lester Henry.

Henry merely acknowledged the introduction with a smiling nod, but Mitchell thrust out his hand. He gave Shayne what was meant to be a bone-crushing handshake and looked faintly disappointed when the detective not only failed to look impressed by his strength, but seemed unconscious of the pressure.

The gray-haired Forbes carefully seated himself again, wincing slightly as he sank back into his chair. "Excuse my pained expression, Mr. Shayne," he said. "I'm just out of the hospital after an operation."

Shayne said, "Oh? Anything serious?"

"It's not serious now, thank goodness," Forbes said. "An intestinal block, but the operation was a success. What can I do for you?"

Shayne said, "Tom Ahern has retained me to prove the charge

he's being held on was a deliberate frame."

Forbes eyebrows went up. "I see. Was it?"

"I think so," the redhead told him. "He doesn't impress me as a sex criminal, and he tells a pretty straightforward story."

Gerald Mitchell said in a booming voice, "The thing astonished me. Didn't know the boy well, of course. Just saw him around the office the past few days. He was auditing our books, you know. But he impressed me as a likable, clean-cut young man."

Forbes said, "It astonished me, too. And grieved me. Tom was one of the most promising young men in the firm."

"Was?" Shayne asked.

Burgett Forbes made a deprecating gesture. "Naturally I have no intention of keeping a man charged with such a revolting crime on my payroll. Of course if he's proved innocent—" He let it trail off.

"In this country it's up to the people to prove guilt," Shayne growled. "Aren't you jumping the gun?"

Forbes said primly, "I'm running a business, not a court of justice, Mr. Shayne. I have to consider public relations. I could lose clients. Unless he's totally cleared of guilt, and not merely declared not guilty for lack of evidence, he'll never work for this firm again."

Shayne said sardonically, "You really stand behind your employees, don't you?"

"I'll be pleased if Tom's proved not guilty," Forbes said in an unruffled voice. "I'd do anything in my power to help prove it. I sincerely like the boy. But I don't see how I can help. The event didn't take place here, and I knew nothing of it until I saw the morning paper. The alleged crime has no connection with Tom's job."

"Maybe it does," Shayne told him. "It got him off the auditing job he was doing."

Forbes eyebrows went up. "Yes, of course. That's why Mr. Mitchell and his head bookkeeper are here. I'm going to have to assign another accountant to finish the job." Then he frowned. "You're not implying that someone framed young Ahern just to get him off the job?"

Mitchell said in a belligerent voice, "He'd better not imply it, unless he wants a suit for slander."

Gangling Lester Henry said more softly, "The implication reflects more against me than you, Mr. Mitchell. I'm responsible for the company books." To Shayne he said, "My books will stand examination by anybody."

Ignoring both men, Shayne gazed steadily at Forbes.

Forbes said, "Even if that's what you mean, the implication is ridiculous. The audit won't be stopped by Ahern's arrest. I'll simply assign another man to it."

"Who?" the detective inquired.

Forbes looked thoughtful. His gaze strayed to Mitchell, then to Henry. An estimating look appeared in his eyes, as though Shayne's suggestion had planted the seed of at least doubt—if not actual suspicion—in his mind. Mitchell scowled at Forbes. Lester Henry's expression remained unchanged.

Forbes gaze moved back to Shayne. He said quietly, "I'm sure Mitchell Development's books are in good order. But just to prove it to myself, I don't think I'll assign any of my other men to take over where Ahern left off. I think I'll make a personal audit."

Mitchell said hotly. "You going to let this shamus talk you into a lot of unnecessary work, Forbes? I don't care who audits my books, so long as he's competent. But you're an executive, not an office boy."

"I often audit accounts myself," Forbes assured him. "When the rest of the staff is snowed under, I have to. Don't worry about my putting myself out."

"You have some other member of the firm in mind to finish the auditing?" Shayne asked Mitchell.

The big man scowled. "I don't like the innuendo in that question, Shayne."

The redhead elevated innocent eyebrows. "What innuendo?"

"Are you suggesting I might have a fix in with one of Forbes' accountants?" Mitchell demanded heatedly.

Shayne grinned at him. "I'm not suggesting anything. It must be your conscience."

Flushing crimson, Mitchell said, "Why you—" Utterly without warning he took a step toward Shayne and threw a powerful right hook at his jaw.

Shayne blocked it with his left forearm and drove his right into Mitchell's stomach. When the man doubled over with a gasp, the redhead smashed a hard left to his jaw. Mitchell collapsed face down.

Burgett Forbes made a clucking sound of disapproval. It was impossible to tell from his expression whether his disapproval was of Mitchell or Shayne, however. The redhead was surprised to see a wide grin on the face of Lester Henry.

Henry erased the grin when he saw Shayne looking at him and said conversationally, "Mr. Mitchell is quite capable of bringing you into court for assault, Mr. Shayne. He doesn't like to come out second best."

Forbes looked at the bookkeeper and said testily, "In that event I would be forced to testify that your employer struck the first blow. Or at least tried to."

Gazing down at his dazedly stirring, half-unconscious employer, Henry said agreeably, "Your privilege, Mr. Forbes. You might lose our account for your trouble,

though. Mr. Mitchell is not a forgiving man." He smiled at Shayne, lowering his voice. "I'm afraid I couldn't volunteer to appear as your witness. I'd lose my job."

Shayne examined the bookkeeper moodily. "You don't like your boss much, do you? At least, that's my impression."

"Oh, we get along," Henry said quickly. "But he does have a quick temper. This isn't the first time I've seen him resort to violence." The barest suggestion of a grin flickered across his face. "It's the first time I've ever seen him on the floor, though. He's pretty competent with his fists."

Forbes glanced at Lester Henry and said in a firm voice, "If Tom Ahern was framed, and the motive lies in Mitchell Development's accounts, I'll find it, Mr. Shayne. You can bank on it that their books will get a thorough going over. What are your plans now?"

"To look up this Crane woman and see what I can shake out of her." He jerked a thumb at the prone Mitchell and said sardonically, "When he comes out of it, tell him it was a pleasure meeting him. And the next time may be just as pleasant."

Nodding curtly to the two other men, he opened the door, strode across the outer office and pushed through the railing gate, smiling at the redheaded receptionist as he went by.

She smiled back.

IV

IT WAS CLOSE to noon when Shayne left the Forbes Auditing Company. He stopped by his office long enough to sign some letters Lucy had typed and to phone Myra Ahern that her husband wanted her to bring him some clothing and a safety razor.

Then he had lunch and arrived at Susan Crane's apartment building at one P.M.

He paused in the vestibule to examine the card reading *Miss Susan Crane* under the mail slot for apartment 2-D. With a thumb he pushed it upward and lifted it from its frame. Turning it over, he was vaguely disappointed to find the reverse side blank. He hadn't really expected to find anything written on its back, but he had held the long-odds hope that *Miss Polly Varden* would be lettered on it.

That it wasn't neither proved or disproved Tom Ahern's story. A thin slip of paper could have been placed over the card, or another card substituted. If the young man was telling the truth, and Shayne believed he was, all it proved was that Ahern's framer had been very careful.

Replacing the card, he long-legged it up the stairs and found the door to apartment 2-D. He was reaching an index finger toward the bell when a muffled crash from inside made him pause to listen. It

sounded as though someone had dropped a large wooden box on the floor. When there was no further sound, he pressed the bell.

No one answered.

When there was still no answer to his second ring, he tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open but remained in the hall, suspecting from the crash that someone was home and just didn't want to answer the door.

The front room was vacant. Directly opposite him was a half-opened kitchen door, and through it he could just see the edge of a back door, which was quietly swinging closed.

It didn't seem likely that the doorbell ringing had caused the legal occupant of the apartment to sneak out the back door. Only someone with no legitimate reason to be in the apartment would behave like that.

Shayne shot across the front room, into the kitchen and grasped the knob of the back door just as a key on the other side shot the bolt of the lock home.

He didn't waste time futilely tugging at the knob. Doing an about-face, he raced back to the front door and took the stairs down two at a time. He rounded the corner of the building and headed for its rear at a long-legged sprint.

The rear yard was separated from the alley by a high board fence. As he neared the gate in its center, he heard the roar of a car engine in the alley. Lifting the gate's latch, he jerked it open and jumped into the alley just in time to see the rear bumper of the car making a dirt-track right turn into the next cross street.

The car had already nearly completed the turn and its angle was such that Shayne couldn't see the license plate. He got such a brief glimpse, he couldn't even make out its make or model. All he could tell about it was that its color was maroon.

Frowning with disgust, the redhead re-entered the gate, rounded the building again and returned to the apartment. Pushing the door shut behind him, he glanced around the front room, crossed to peer into the kitchen again, then investigated a door at the side of the front room.

This gave onto a bedroom, and the place was a shambles. The blankets, sheets and mattress had been ripped from the bed. The closet door stood open and feminine clothing was strewed all over the floor. All the dresser drawers were open, too, and their contents lay scattered about on the floor. One drawer, obviously the one that had caused the crash of a moment before, lay upside down on the floor, where the ransacker apparently had accidentally dropped it by pulling it out too violently.

A bathroom door, closed, was at one side of the room. Shayne

opened it, and thrust in his head.

Susan Crane was at home. She lay in the bathtub on her back, her blonde hair neatly tied up in a towel. A small, bluish hole marred the perfection of one bare breast precisely over her heart.

A woman surprised in her tub is likely at least to sit up and grab the sides of the tub. The blonde's relaxed posture suggested she had been lolling in the same position she was in now, and that the killer had opened the door and fired before she could make any reaction at all. The absence of any blood indicated she had died instantly. It was unusual, but Shayne had heard of similar cases.

Shayne's eyes were bleak as he leaned down to test the bath water with a finger. It was still warm, denoting that she had died a very short time before, possibly only minutes before he'd rung the doorbell.

Returning to the bedroom, he studied the mess there again. There was nothing he could see that the ransacker had missed, and he decided it would be a waste of time to go over the room again. As the front room was not disordered at all, presumably Shayne's ring had disturbed the intruder before he'd gotten that far.

Shayne gave it a quick but thorough search. It was also a neater search than the one in the bedroom, because he put everything back where he found it.

He turned up nothing of interest in the room until he came to a row of books between bronze bookends on a small table. Lifting them one at a time, he glanced at the titles, noting they were all popular novels, and then carefully riffled the pages. A narrow slip of paper popped from the third one he examined and fluttered to the floor.

Setting down the book, he picked up the paper. It was a cancelled check in the amount of ten thousand, two hundred and twenty-four dollars, made out to the Concord Construction Company of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The amount had been impressed by a check machine and in the upper lefthand corner was printed *Mitchell Development Company, Inc., Miami, Fla.* The signature on the check was that of Lester Henry.

Turning the check over, Shayne saw that the endorsement was merely an ink stamp reading: *Concord Construction Company, for deposit only.* The stamp of the bank of deposit was for the Benson Trust Company of Fort Lauderdale.

Shayne thrust the check into his inside breast pocket, crossed to the phone and dialed police headquarters. He asked for Chief Will Gentry.

When the chief came on, the redhead said, "I'm over at Susan Crane's apartment, Will. She's been murdered."

"What!" Gentry roared. Then he growled in his normal tone, "Don't touch anything. We'll be right over."

The chief was accompanied by a plain-clothes detective named Gannon when he arrived. Shayne had barely finished explaining the circumstances of his discovery of the body, including the killer's escape by the back door, when the technical experts began to arrive. First the M.E. got there, then, in rapid order, a photographer and a fingerprint man. When Gentry began firing instructions at them, Shayne quietly walked out.

The readhead hadn't mentioned the cancelled check, because he wanted to do some investigating before he had to surrender it as evidence. And he knew that Gentry would have demanded it if he'd showed it to him. He wasn't exactly suppressing evidence, as it was possible that the killer had been searching for something else, and the check had no bearing on the murder. Shayne doubted this, but it would make as good an excuse as any when he eventually handed it over to Gentry and the chief inquired why he hadn't turned it in at once.

The redhead drove straight to his office and made a long-distance phone call to Fort Lauderdale. His call was to a police lieutenant named Howard Canning whom he knew there.

When he got the lieutenant on the phone, Shayne said, "This is Mike Shayne, Howie. I need a favor."

"Sure, Mike," Canning said in a hospitable tone. "What's up?"

"Do you know anything about an outfit up there called the Concord Construction Company?"

"Umm—Concord. Never heard of it. Can't be very big. In a town this size I'd know the name if it amounted to much."

Shayne said, "All I know about it is that it banks at Benson Trust. Can you get me some dope on it?"

"What kind of dope?"

"The type of business it does. Particularly what business it does with the Mitchell Development Company of Miami. Who runs it. Anything at all you can turn up."

"That ought to be easy," the lieutenant said. "I know the head cashier over at Benson Trust. When do you want this?"

"As soon as possible," Shayne said. "Phone my office and reverse the charges. If I'm not here, just give the dope to Lucy."

"Will do," Canning said cheerfully. "You owe me a drink next time you hit Lauderdale, though."

"You'll get it," Shayne assured him, and hung up.

For the next hour the redhead dictated some letters to Lucy and signed them after they were typed up. Then Howard Canning called back.

"All it took was a couple of phone calls, Mike," he said. "One

to the post office and one to Benson Trust. I got a little dope for you."

"What?"

"Well, there isn't any visible evidence that Concord Construction does any business at all. It's not listed in the phone book or the city directory. Seems to be just a post office box."

"That's interesting," Shayne said. "What'd you get from Benson Trust?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Even though the head cashier over there is a friend of mine, bankers are like lawyers when it comes to giving out information. He did tell me all Concord Construction has is a checking account and the authorized signature for the account. But he wouldn't give me any dope on deposits or withdrawals."

"What's the authorized signature " Shayne asked.

"Henry Lester."

The redhead's shaggy eyebrows went up in surprise. If there had been any doubt in his mind that some kind of financial crookedness was going on at the Mitchell Development Company, this information dispelled it. It would be too much of a coincidence for the authorized signature on the Concord Construction account to be the exact reverse of Mitchell Development's head bookkeeper unless it was a phony name.

Howard Canning went on, "The head cashier said he'd be willing to give me more information if I could assure him it was necessary as part of some criminal investigation. Otherwise he wants a court order before he'll loosen up."

"You can assure him it's necessary," Shayne growled. "I can almost guarantee that the Concord account is part of an embezzlement setup that's bleeding funds from the Mitchell Development Company down here. See if you can talk him into giving you a complete list of deposits and withdrawals, will you, Howie?"

"Okay, Mike," the lieutenant said. "I think he'll go along when I tell him that. Want me to phone back what I find out?"

"Yeah. If I'm not here, just give the dope to Lucy."

When he hung up, Shayne went out into the outer office and said to Lucy, "If Lieutenant Canning from Ford Lauderdale calls back, accept the call and take the message. I'll be out the rest of the day, but I'll check back to see if he's phoned."

"Where are you going, Michael?" she asked.

"Right now to the Forbes Auditing Company. From there, wherever the lead I'm working on takes me,"

Lifting his hat from the clothestree near the door, he slapped it onto his head and strode out.

The sky was overcast when he reached the street but the likelihood of rain failed to depress him.

V

AT THE Forbes Auditing Company the redheaded receptionist sent Shayne into the private office immediately. This time he found Burgett Forbes alone. The man greeted the detective with reserved civility and asked him to have a seat.

Shayne took a chair in front of the desk, pulled out the cancelled check and tossed it before Forbes. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

After studying it for a moment, Forbes looked up inquiringly. "What am I supposed to make of it? I assume it's a check in payment for services by a construction company. Mitchell Development deals with numerous construction outfits. They do a lot of building."

"Concord Construction is nothing but a post office box in Fort Lauderdale," Shayne informed him. "It isn't even listed in the phone book. It maintains a checking account at Benson Trust, and the account's only authorized signature is Henry Lester."

Forbes looked surprised. "The reverse of Lester Henry?"

"Yeah. Look at the signature on that check."

Forbes examined it again. "Lester Henry. There's nothing wrong in that. I've gone over the work Tom Ahern did on the Mitchell account, and it seems that Henry signs all checks. He's both head bookkeeper and chief accountant. Many companies have their chief accountant sign checks. Where'd you find this?"

"In Susan Crane's apartment. just after she was murdered."

"Murdered!" Forbes said in a shocked tone. "She's dead?"

"As dead as you can get," Shayne said grimly. "I think the killer was after that check. I suspect Susan was doing a little blackmailing."

Forbes frowned. "Blackmailing who?"

"Whoever killed her. It's pretty obvious now that she framed Tom Ahern to prevent him from finishing his audit. She probably was paid for the job. Her possession of the cancelled check suggests she knew exactly why her hirer wanted Ahern out of the way. It also suggests she was using it as a lever to raise her fee. She got a bullet instead."

Forbes' frown deepened. "You think Lester Henry killed her?"

"I don't know," the redhead said. "Right now he looks like a good suspect. Happen to know what kind of car he drives?"

Forbes shook his head. "Sorry, no. May I keep this check?"

"It's evidence," Shayne said, reaching across to take it from the man's fingers. "I just showed it to you to give you a steer in auditing Mitchell's books."

Forbes watched the check disappear into the detective's inside

pocket. After a thoughtful moment he said, "From what you say, it looks on the surface at least as though Henry has been feeding corporate funds into a dummy company. Probably the records will all jibe. There'll be forged work orders in the files, invoices for service rendered from Condon Construction and so on. But now that I know where to look, it won't be much trouble to expose the whole thing. You've been very helpful, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne grunted and came to his feet. "By the way, Forbes, what kind of car do you drive?"

"A Ford. Why?"

"What color?"

"Gray and blue. Why do you ask?"

"Just checking," the redhead said noncommittally. "See you around."

He walked out of the office.

The offices of the Mitchell Development Company were as elaborate as Forbes Auditing's were plain. A receptionist told Shayne that Gerald Mitchell was not in. When as second choice he asked for the chief accountant and head bookkeeper, she directed him across a wide lobby, floored wall-to-wall with carpeting whose pile was so thick it gave the feeling of walking on a feather bed, to a door lettered: *Lester Henry*.

Shayne rapped, opened the door and went in without waiting for an answer to the rap.

Lester Henry glanced up from the pile of papers he was studying, smiled amiably when he recognized his visitor and waved toward a chair.

Shayne said, "I won't be here that long. Just wanted to ask you a question or two about the Condon Construction Company."

Henry's smile disappeared. "What about it?"

"Do much business with the outfit?"

"Quite a bit," Henry admitted. "Offhand I'd say about a hundred thousand a year. I could give you the exact figure from our books. Why?"

Shayne said, "Odd that they've got a man whose name is so much like yours. Henry Lester."

The head bookkeeper's face didn't change expression. "I've noticed the man's name on invoices. What's odd about it? Henry's a common name—and so's Lester."

Shayne said, "What kind of car do you drive?"

"Huh?" Henry asked. "A Plymouth. Why?"

"What color?"

"Green."

"What's your boss drive?"

"Mr. Mitchell? He comes to work in a gray Cadillac. When he goes out on business, he usually takes a company car."

Shayne said, "What color's that?"

"There are five of them."

"Any maroon ones?"

Henry nodded. "Two. A Dodge and a Ford. What's this all about anyway "

Shayne said, "You use the company cars too?"

"Sometimes," Henry admitted.

"Use one today?"

"I took one out for lunch. The Dodge. What are you getting at?"

"Just curious," Shayne told him. "I'll be seeing you again."

Lester Henry was staring at the door puzzledly when the redhead pulled it closed behind him.

Outside the detective had just reached the company parking lot when a maroon Ford drove in. Gerald Mitchell climbed out of it.

The man's face darkened when he saw Shayne. Striding over to where the redhead stood next to his car, he demanded, "What are you doing around here, Shayne?"

"I was looking for you," Shayne said mildly. "I settled for Lester Henry."

"I have nothing to say to you," Mitchell said hotly. "Do your prowling somewhere else."

In the same mild tone Shayne said, "Thought you might be interested in knowing your company is being tapped for around a hundred thousand a year."

Mitchell stared at him. "What?"

"According to Henry, you've been paying out about that to the Concord Construction Company of Fort Lauderdale. The outfit is nothing but a post office box."

Mitchell licked his lips. "Where'd you get that information?"

"Seems to be common knowledge," Shayne said. "Susan Crane knew it. That's why she was murdered."

Mitchell's stare grew even more wide-eyed. "The woman young Ahern attacked? She's dead?"

"Uh-huh," Shayne said. "Shot. By somebody driving a maroon car."

He glanced casually at the Ford Mitchell had just gotten out of, then climbed in his car, backed and drove from the lot. In the rear-view mirror he could see that Mitchell had not moved. He was still staring after Shayne.

That ought to stir something up, the detective thought. He'd spread the information that he was aware of the fraud in enough places.

It was now nearly five, and he stopped at a drug store to phone his office. Lucy told him that Howard Canning had phoned about fifteen minutes before.

"Concord Construction has had an account at Benson Trust for three years," she told Shayne. "Deposits have amounted to roughly three hundred thousand dollars. Regularly every six months a check made to cash clears out all but a few dollars. And there's a funny thing, Michael."

"What's that, angel?"

"Every deposit has been a check on the Mitchell Construction Company."

"That figures," Shayne said. "Did Canning find out what the current balance of the account is?"

"Just over twenty-five thousand. The last check against the account was three months ago, so it should be three more months before the mysterious Mr. Henry Lester presents his semi-annual check drawn to cash."

"Not this time, I don't think," Shayne told her. "I think he'll close out the account when the banks open in the morning."

When he left the drug store, Shayne stopped at a tavern for his first relaxation of the day. After two double cognacs chased with ice water he felt mellow enough to enjoy dinner. He had a leisurely dinner in a restaurant and arrived at his apartment hotel about eight P.M.

As he climbed from his car, a black sedan drifted from a parking place a quarter block behind him. From the edge of his vision he saw it inch out from the curb, was starting to turn away when it registered on him that it was moving his way with peculiar slowness.

Shayne didn't take time to glance over his shoulder to confirm his suspicion. If he had, it would have been too late to react. Obeying the danger alarm that started clanging in his head, he dropped flat on his face.

A motor roared even as he was falling, its noise almost drowning out the staccato explosions of three close-placed shots. Then the car was past, its accelerator to the floor.

Raising his head, Shayne saw that it was a new Chevrolet, and mentally recited its license number. From his prone position he got only a glimpse of the top of the driver's head through the rear-view window. And the glimpse was useless for identification, for the man wore a hat. Then the car spun around the next corner and was gone.

Rising and dusting himself off, Shayne glanced at his car and found three neat holes in the door at belt-buckle height. He had managed to stir up the killer, he thought grimly. And the man must be a dead shot.

His face was trenched with anger as he strode into the apartment hotel and took the elevator to his floor. When he entered his apartment, he slammed his hat onto the sofa, crossed to the phone and dialed police headquarters.

The desk sergeant answered. Shayne rasped, "This is Mike Shayne. How quick can you get me the name of the owner of a black nineteen fifty-nine Chevrolet?" He reeled off the license number.

"Just a second," the sergeant said. A few moments passed, then his voice returned. "That car was reported stolen not ten minutes ago, Mike. Where'd you see it?"

Shayne had suspected it would

turn out to be a stolen car. The killer wouldn't take a chance of using his own. He grated, "It headed south past my apartment building about three minutes ago. Turned west at the first corner. It's probably been abandoned near here by now."

"Oh? How you figure that?"

"Intuition," Shayne growled, and hung up.

Five minutes later he was standing under a cooling shower. On the edge of the bathroom sink, within easy reaching distance, there was a cognac glass and a glass of ice water.

VI

A FEW MINUTES before nine A.M. on the following morning Shayne parked across the street from the Benson Trust Company in Fort Lauderdale. Lighting a cigarette, he settled back to wait.

Exactly at nine a green Plymouth sedan parked on the opposite side of the street. Lester Henry got out carrying a brief case and went into the bank. Shayne climbed from his car, crossed the street and looked through the glass front door of the bank. The thin bookkeeper was presenting a check at one of the teller's windows.

Shayne watched as the teller handed over several stacks of banded currency. Henry dropped them into the brief case.

The redhead moved back to his car and was slumped in the front seat with his hat pulled down over his eyes when Henry came from the bank. The man climbed into his car and drove away.

Shayne let him get a quarter-block lead before swinging in a U-turn and following.

Lester Henry headed straight back for Miami. Apparently he had no suspicion of being followed, for he kept to a sedate speed through populated areas and opened up only to fifty miles per hour on the highway.

It was only a quarter of ten when they reached the outskirts of Miami. Lester Henry drove through town to the south side and parked in front of an apartment building. Shayne parked two spaces back and got out of his car only a moment after Henry got from his.

The redhead was a dozen feet behind the bookkeeper when he entered the building, but Henry was still unaware of being followed, for he never once glanced back.

Inside the building the man took the stairs to the second floor. Shayne reached the top just as he was keying open a door. As Henry entered the apartment, the redhead quickly moved forward and caught the door as it started to close. Pushing in, he shut the door behind him and leaned against it.

Lester Henry looked surprised, but not particularly upset. He said.

"Hello, Mr. Shayne Where'd you come from?"

"Fort Lauderdale," Shayne said easily. "I hoped you'd lead me to the rest of the loot. Have you?"

Henry looked puzzled. "What loot?"

"The three hundred thousand paid to the Concord Construction Company. You live here?"

"Of course," Henry said. "What are you talking about? This is all of the embezzled money we've recovered so far. About twenty-five thousand." He hefted the brief case.

The man's attitude, faintly puzzled and completely lacking in guilt, caused Shayne to tug thoughtfully at his left earlobe. The detective glanced about the apartment. Beyond the front room a small archway led to a kitchenette. To the right a door, barely cracked open, seemed to lead to a bedroom.

There were no other rooms, and the apartment's furnishings, while of good quality, were worn from years of use. The place didn't add up to the sort of home a man who had embezzled over a quarter of a million dollars would maintain.

Shayne said, "Maybe you'd better bring me up to date before we go any further. Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I've been over to the Benson Trust Company in Fort Lauderdale," Henry said. "On Mr. Mitchell's orders. You were right in what you told Mr. Mitchell. He discovered that a young man in the order department has been entering forged work orders to Condon Construction Company in the files, then billing our company for the work ordered. Mr. Mitchell forced him to write a check for the balance in the Benson Trust account and sent me over to cash it. He thought we'd better recover a much as possible before turning the young man over to the police."

Shayne continued to worry his left earlobe as he studied the thin bookkeeper moodily. Moving away from the door into the center of the room, he said, "If Mitchell sent you after the money, why did you bring it home instead of taking it to the office?"

"Mr. Mitchell told me to. He had a business appointment over this way this morning, and suggested we meet at my place instead of at the office. He should be along any minute now."

Shayne started to pace back and forth, still tugging at his earlobe. After two turns up and down the room, he paused and said, "I'm beginning to believe you, Henry. But it doesn't increase my respect for your intelligence. You've been taken."

Henry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Who approves the work orders at Mitchell Development?"

"Why, Mr. Mitchell, naturally."

"And who okays invoices?"

"Mr. Mitchell," Henry replied.

Shayne said, "So when your department gets an okayed invoice accompanied by an okayed work order, you automatically issue and mail a check and make a book entry?"

"Yes, but there was no way I could catch the fraud," Henry said defensively. "The books balanced with all the accompanying records. I'm a bookkeeper, not a detective. It was up to the annual auditors to catch this thing. They're supposed to check with everybody we deal with to make sure our recorded receipts and disbursements are correct. If they'd done half a job, they'd have discovered long ago that there was no such company as Concord Construction."

"Sure," Shayne said. "Except somebody in Forbes Auditing was covering up for the embezzler."

Henry said slowly. "In previous years Mr. Forbes always handled our audit personally. This year he was in the hospital when it came due."

Shayne grinned bleakly. "That's why Tom Ahern was framed. Whoever was left in charge at Forbes routinely assigned Ahern to the job. Forbes probably was too sick to know what was going on, and by the time Mitchell discovered his partner in crime wasn't doing the audit, it had already started. Forbes pulling Ahern off without excuse might have roused suspicion, so they got him out of the way by framing him into jail.

"The two of them put on a good act in front of us. Forbes announcing he'd personally make the audit, and Mitchell trying to talk him out of it. They had no intention of letting anyone but Forbes get a look at those books."

Henry said in a weak voice, "But Mr. Mitchell said this young man in the order department was working the fraud."

"Nuts," Shayne said harshly. "There isn't any young man in the order department. Your boss is the embezzler, and Forbes is his partner."

Lester Henry blinked. "Then why did he send me to recover this last amount?" he asked.

"To pin the blame on you," Shayne told him. "That's why he used the reverse of your name for the Benson Trust account. In case anything went wrong, you were set up to be the patsy."

The thin bookkeeper frowned puzzledly. "That wouldn't work, Mr. Shayne. I wouldn't just sit still and take the blame. A thorough police investigation would be bound to prove he was the one who rented that post office box and opened the Benson Trust account."

"If you were around to tell your story," the redhead said dryly. "I've got an idea the reason he told you to meet him here was to make sure you wouldn't be around.

If you left a confession and committed suicide, you think the police would look any further? Particularly when the money you just withdrew was found with your body."

Henry's eyes grew wide. "You think he means to murder me?" he asked incredulously.

"He's already killed once," Shayne growled. "Another murder won't bother him."

A slight movement at the side of the room swung the redhead's gaze that way. The bedroom door had opened wide and Gerald Mitchell stood in it. He had a German Luger in his hand.

"You've figured things out beautifully, Shayne," Mitchell said ironically. "Even that another kill won't bother me. Or two more kills."

He moved into the room, carefully keeping both men covered. Burgett Forbes, his face pale and his hands trembling, followed.

Lester Henry asked stupidly, "How'd you get in my bedroom?"

"We were there when you and Shayne arrived," Mitchell told him in a cold voice. "You gave me a key so I wouldn't have to wait in the hall if I arrived first. Remember?"

Shayne growled, "You might have gotten away with killing Henry, Mitchell. But how do you figure you'll explain me?"

"You're investigating Susan Crane's murder, aren't you?" Mitchell inquired. "You caught up with her killer and he shot you. Then, realizing he was done, he committed suicide. See any flaws?"

Forbes said in a shaky voice, "God, no. Don't kill me. Mitchell, I didn't know I'd get involved in murder."

"That's just too bad," Mitchell snapped.

Forbes said in a high voice, "I didn't have anything to do with Susan's death. I didn't even know you meant to kill her."

"Why did you kill her, Mitchell?" Shayne asked. "She put too much presure on you?"

Mitchell scowled at him. "The little tramp wanted a hundred grand. She stole that check from my files when I took her to my office for a little romance late one night. After all the money I spent on her!" He sounded grieved at the injustice of it all.

Forbes said, "Can't we figure some way out of this beside killing? Mitchell—"

"There isn't any other way," Mitchell snapped. Roughly he pushed the older man to one side. "You're first, Shayne. You'll get it between the eyes."

He brought up the pistol and started to level it. Ignoring the threatening muzzle, Shayne flicked his gaze at Forbes, who stood trembling violently slightly behind and to one side of Mitchell.

The redhead let an encouraging grin form on his face. "That's right,

Forbes," he said approvingly. "Hit him over the head with it."

Forbes' mouth gaped open, for he hadn't made a move. But Shayne's tone was so natural, it convinced Mitchell his partner had decided to take drastic action to save himself. He ducked the expected blow on the head and spun at the same time. He fired point-blank at Forbes' stomach.

Forbes gasped and took three rapid steps backward, both hands clasped to his middle. He sat heavily on the floor and rolled to his side with a groan.

Gerald Mitchell never had a chance to swing the gun back toward Shayne. The redhead was moving forward as the man began to duck. An instant after the shot sounded Shayne's right fist crashed into his jaw.

Mitchell did another complete spin, more slowly this time, and collapsed on his face.

"He must have a glass jaw," Shayne commented to Lester Henry. "All it seems to take is one blow."

The front door burst open and a uniformed policeman with a drawn gun burst into the room. He was followed by chief Will Gentry.

"Well, well," Shayne said. "The Marines, about thirty seconds too late. What brought you in at the finish, Will?"

The chief glumly examined both men on the floor. "We were outside before you got here, Mike. You're not the only one who can solve crimes. We've been tailing Mitchell all morning."

"Yeah " Shayne said. "Why?"

"We work too, you know," Gentry said. "We backtracked on Susan Crane's life. She was Mitchell's kept woman for over a year. We figured it might be a crime of passion."

"You figured wrong," the redhead told him. "It was just money. Better get an ambulance on the way for Forbes. Then, after we do one more thing, I'll tell you all about it."

"What thing?" Gentry asked.

"Go down and get my client out of jail."

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

If you have to hide a body . . . it may be later than you think. A humorous crime story with a chilling climax.

The Twenty Friends of William Shaw

by RAYMOND E. BANKS

IT ISN'T OFTEN that a butler calls at my house. Even less often is he carrying a lunch basket. But I admitted Higgins because he worked for William Shaw, and William Shaw once—well, he had done me a great favor.

Higgins was affably formal, and

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conveyed his employer's respects. I brought out a bottle of my best wine, still remembering my indebtedness—because William Shaw was an old and true friend.

"Bring me up to date," I said. "I haven't seen Mr. Shaw for a long time. Well, since he was—"

"Since his marriage," said Higgins quietly. I had always admired Higgins' firm jaw and precise manner of speech. He was the kind of butler who could competently direct the affairs of the moment by just the right kind of smile or frown. Now his face was absolutely set in stone—a man committed to a purpose. "Since his marriage," he repeated.

"Grace Shaw was rather—I mean, after the marriage her presence put a kind of damper on the old crowd," I said.

"Mr. Shaw had very few weaknesses," said Higgins. "His wife was one of them. An older man—a younger woman. His later years have been difficult."

Higgins moved his lunch basket delicately with the pointed toe of his conservative black shoes. "Because of Mr. Shaw's desire to help people he found himself in a bad position," said Higgins "There is little left of what was once a large estate. Divorce was out of the question, since Mrs. Shaw would certainly have settled for no less than most of it."

I recalled the last time I'd been to the Shaw's—the stunning sparkle of the necklace Grace Shaw had worn and the way she had caressed it against her white throat.

"Most certainly out of the question," I said, unconsciously imitating a little Higgins' extremely precise English. It was hard not to imitate that dry forceful voice.

"Deserting one's wife and going into hiding leaves much to be desired." Higgins went on. "Principally, it cuts a man off from his friends—and Mr. Shaw always lived for his friends."

"We had some great times," I said. "Before."

"Furthermore, accidents are hard to explain," Higgins went on.

I found myself staring now at the basket with a growing interest and distaste.

I shuddered, but it may have been the wine. It sparkled blood-red in Higgins' pale fingers as he lifted his glass to the sunlight. My picture window was open, and a strong earth smell, a smell of spring and flowers lingered in the room—a time of hope and reawakening.

"You have a fine home here," said Higgins, looking around. "You've done well. Mr. Shaw will be highly delighted to know that you have done so well."

"I was once at the point of killing myself," I said. There was something about him that invited confidence. "I was a pretty dismal failure. I was broke, without friends or family. I was also serious-

ly ill, and I didn't even have enough money to buy drugs to ease my pain. I went up into the Hollywood Hills. To that big sign up there that spells out. H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D across the face of the hills. People used to jump off that sign, you know."

"But then you met Mr. Shaw," Higgins said, smiling a little.

"Turning point," I said. "He was a stranger—he owed me nothing. But he spent a great deal of time and money in getting me back on my feet. I shall never forget it."

"Of course you shan't," said Higgins. "Mr. Shaw has at least twenty friends like you. People who were in desperate circumstances when he found them."

Higgins edged the basket further from himself, and closer to me. His smile increased in warmth and understanding.

"I always hoped—I could repay him in some way," I said.

"Mr. Shaw never expects repayment when he helps people," said Higgins. "Still, there is a little matter in which you might be able to help him."

"Well, if there's anything—" I let the words hang, because the smile was no longer in evidence. He looked suddenly almost forbidding.

"Unfortunately the man who has been always the soul of kindness may well die at the hands of the state," said Higgins, his eyes clouded. "However, it is probable that Grace Shaw's disappearance will cause no great comment. She has disappeared before—once with a sailor for a two-week affair in San Diego. Another time, I believe, with a truck driver."

"I had heard she had her faults," I said.

Higgins' perfectly tailored shoulders shrugged. "This time—who knows? Butcher, baker, candlestick maker. She is gone and Mr. Shaw looks and acts twenty years younger—as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Of course, there is her pesky brother trying to make trouble. But Mr. Shaw won't have him around, now that Grace has gone."

He finished his wine and rose. "Mr. Shaw's best, and closest friends are all helping him. Perhaps twenty or so—the ones who owed him the most. I trust we can count on you."

"I-I—"

But Higgins bowed, and moved to the door. "I wouldn't delay if I were you," he said. "The weather is warm and the dry ice won't last long. Good day, Mr. Benson. But not goodbye. Mr. Shaw will soon have one of his old-time get-togethers. A sort of celebration, and you and your wife are most cordially invited."

I walked him to the door. I accompanied him across the small porch, down the walk and to the

door of the Rolls. "I haven't had much experience in these matters," I protested.

"Mr. Goodlace went fishing on a deep-sea boat," said Higgins. "Mr. Al Drayton was putting in a brick patio. Eileen Wilson found her garden needed new rose bushes—the deep-rooted kind. One's mind can conceive of many possibilities." Higgins grasped my hand and smiled. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Benson. You look pale. I suggest you lie down and rest for a few moments. Mr. Shaw always considered you one of his staunchest—"

The Rolls was gone.

I HAVE NEVER been one to do much work in the yard. But the family was away, and it was a sunny afternoon, so I went out into the garden with the shovel, leaving the basket in the garage. The first patch of ground resisted any considerable digging, but I found another softer spot by a patch of hyacinth.

Soon I became aware of another presence at my side.

"What are you doing," said the small child—a boy. He was watching me with serious eyes.

I thought of a possible range of replies but settled for a simple one. "Digging," I said.

"Digging what?" the neighbor's child asked. It was Danny, the curious one, already launched on a lifetime of gossip.

"A hole," I said, beginning to sweat even though I was barely more than six inches down.

This went on until he learned I was planting a rose bush.

"My mom doesn't plant rosebushes that deep," he said, hard and suspicious. Normally, he had an attractive young face full of intelligence. Today his eyes looked close-set, his mouth sneering.

"You may be right," I said abandoning the project. With thirty-five children loose in the neighborhood, it didn't seem precisely the right way to proceed. There wasn't much time left as my wife would be back at five, and my son Timmy at six.

Many persons do not know the virtues of the modern-day city dump. The old-fashioned dump with its shacks and its islands of rubble, some burning, surrounded by railroad tracks and inhabited by derelicts is a thing of the past.

The dump near my home is run by the JHK Construction Company. It's a tract of low land that is being slowly filled, and will eventually become the construction site for a long row of forty-thousand-dollar homes. It is surrounded by a high wire fence, and has a polite attendant who checks in the customers at the entrance. Beyond the gate are several winding roads, and a fresh site for the dumping activities of the day. As the trucks drive up, a bulldozer snorts, scrambles whines and

keens, mashing and crushing the discarded goods into the rich, black earth.

Beneath its blade, mixed into a permanent cocktail with the earth are old bedsprings, clippings from the gardeners' trucks, papers, bottles, clothes and furniture. After the bulldozer passes over there is nothing left but churned up ground with a leavening of mashed paper or wood or green branches. Tomorrow another layer will cover this layer, then another, and eventually still another. Archaeologists of the future will have to take the Twentieth Century bulldozer into account.

Once inside the gate you join a procession of trucks, with a few plain cars with trailers moving to the dumping spot of the day. You back in a few feet from where the bulldozer works and deposit your stuff. There are always some coming in and dumping in the shadow of the bulldozer and as it eternally groans away, the dumping spot changes.

I had filled the car with the accumulation of the garage, which I had been promising to do for months anyway. Things that the weekly pickup service wouldn't touch. Higgins' basket looked innocent enough in the symphony of crud I carried.

I was about to back into a dumping spot when I took note of a car only one truck ahead of me. It looked disturbingly familiar. I hadn't seen Ben Jackson for a couple of years, but there was no doubt that the car was sporting one of Ben's distinctive paint jobs. And there was good old Ben himself, one of William Shaw's best friends, jockeying the vehicle into position to dump.

I parked out of the line and went over to see him. He wasn't glad to see me, and when I surveyed his trailer full of dumpings, I could understand why. Higgins had been going the rounds that Saturday.

"I thought of it first!" he cried.

"It is a large dump," I said. "A very large dump."

He was a fat, balding man with vague brown eyes. He waved at the three dump attendants who were busily engaged in picking over the materials left by the trucks.

"One could get by. Two—that would look suspicious," he said.

"I can't help it," I said. "There are only so many places."

That was when the accident happened. I don't know whether I slipped, or whether Ben stumbled against me. But there was a truck hurrying in alongside of him; it caught me and knocked me flat on the ground.

Things went whirly-whirly for a while. I heard voices and the large, kind face of William Shaw came down out of the sky and smiled and thanked me for the kind of assistance I was giving him. I tried to

protest that I really couldn't help my bungling when I felt the strong fingers of the dump attendant pressing me into the seat behind the wheel of my car.

"Your friend helped you empty your stuff and left. You better go home now," said the attendant, wetting his lips nervously.

His nervousness wasn't hard to understand. I might be badly hurt. I might even require ambulance attention. Later I might sue the dump. On the whole, he thought it better if I left. So I did. The aspects of danger of my end were strong enough to get me out of there in a hurry.

Safe on the road, I looked in the back seat to be sure all the stuff had vanished. The dump stuff was gone, and that pleased me. But resting on the back seat were two baskets instead of my original one.

I tried to think but didn't get very far. I was still dazed and aching from the dump accident, although I had suffered no permanent damage. I decided to go on home and look up Ben Jackson's address and go calling on him with a crowbar.

My anger lasted all the way home, until I drove up in front of the house and saw, on my front porch, a too-familiar basket. The note attached to it was written in a flowing feminine hand:

"You'll remember," it said, "Sarah King, a good friend of William Shaw's. I haven't seen you for a long time, Mr. Benson, but I know you can help me. I am practically a shut-in these days and live in an apartment. I know you are a gentleman and will be glad to help an old lady who doesn't get around much. Would you please take care of Mr. Shaw's rosebush for me? You live closest to me of all his friends and have a nice, big yard." It was signed *Sarah King*.

I hurried into the house. I was panicky. True, William Shaw had saved my life, and helped start me on a useful career. But there were limits to gratitude.

The phone rang with a monotonous petulance which suggested it had been ringing for a long time. It was Charles Moriseau, Grace Shaw's brother. I recognized the defensively belligerent voice before he'd spoken three words.

"Have you seen Grace Shaw?" he asked.

"No," I said, trying to make my voice sound natural though fear kept tightening my throat. I had not seen her. I had seen only some white packages, securely wrapped and tied, in three baskets. So at least I wasn't lying.

"My illustrious brother-in-law claims she's disappeared," said Moriseau. "I suspect foul play by some of his crude friends."

I had a mental picture of Moriseau as I'd last seen him. The too-cultured voice, the moist hands, the balding head, the fish-pale blue

eyes that peered suspiciously on all the human race. I remembered Shaw's gracious good humor and fun. I began to get a little angry.

"Your sister hasn't a very conspicuous reputation as a stay-at-home," I said.

"I think there's something odd going on," he said. "I may be coming to see you and some of his so-called friends—with the police."

"Any day, old man, any day," I said and hung up. That settled it. *I* wasn't going to be Moriseau's tool for destroying my good friend, William Shaw.

A week went by. I was ready for the expected visit of Moriseau and a heavy-footed policeman. I was completely ready, and even had an alibi for that particular Saturday afternoon. No one came; there was nothing in the papers. Once I drove by the Shaw place in Bel Air, one of the largest mansions. I saw only a uniformed Pinkerton man patroling the grounds. I tried to call Higgins but the phone was answered by a professional guard who said nobody was home.

The tension lasted, but nothing disturbing happened. However, my wife complained about my peevishness and one night I threw an old shoe at my son.

Relief finally came. I received a note addressed by Higgins which read: "Mr. Shaw is taking a trip to Europe, after a trying winter. He will see all his old friends when he returns in the fall."

So that ended it. William Shaw was going to be all right, and I and the rest of us had nothing to worry about.

"WHY DO YOU swerve whenever you see a police car?" my wife asked. "Have you been cheating on your income tax again?"

Why, indeed, I wondered. To hell with waiting until fall! I wanted to be doubly sure that no policeman would come knocking at my door.

I bought a bottle of champagne and forced my way into the Shaw mansion. Again I met the imperturbable Higgins and told him about the call from Moriseau.

Higgins smiled his quiet smile. "We have nothing to fear, Mr. Benson. In fact, the trip to Europe was deliberately planned to put an end to Moriseau's staying here, now that his sister has—ah—run off with another disreputable man. There were just the four of us. Mr. and Mrs. Shaw, Mr. Moriseau and myself. Mrs. Shaw is gone. Now we can close the house and he will have to leave. But there'll be good times for all of us again in the fall!"

I pointed to some luggage lined up in the hall—two large trunks, and several women's suitcases. "It looks as if I barely made it," I said. "Maybe I'd better give this champagne to William and be on my way."

Higgins shook his head. "That

wouldn't be wise, Mr. Benson. We have convinced Moriseau that his sister has run off. It wouldn't look right if he saw familiar faces —faces of the old crowd—appearing so soon."

"I see your logic," I said, setting the bottle on the luggage. "Give my regards to William."

I STOOD AT THE dock in Los Angeles Harbor watching the departure of the big liner for Hawaii. It had been all too easy to discover the booking in the name of "Mr. and Mrs. Higgins." I saw them briefly at the rail, but took great care to make sure they wouldn't see me.

Charles Moriseau was there, grinning and waving up at his sister and his new brother-in-law. With William dead and buried by his twenty best friends, they had it made. Grace could support both Higgins and Charles in good style, because none of them spent with the generosity that poor William had displayed all of his life. Her necklace sparkled from her smooth throat, Higgins' teeth glistened in the sun as he hugged her and laughed a happy, unbutler-like laugh.

I left and sent my telegrams to the harbor police, telling them anonymously what they'd find in the three baskets in the Higgins stateroom. Baskets that I'd kept on ice in a friendly butcher shop while wracking my poor, unimaginative brains in an unnecessary effort to get myself off the well-known hook.

Higgins had planned the murder well, and executed the removal of the body neatly—the practical butler to the end. Higgins had made only one slip—a slip he couldn't help. There were three men and one woman living in that mansion. The woman was supposed to be dead—yet in the luggage he'd prepared for the trip to Europe (and wasn't it obvious that they'd take reservations in the opposite direction) Higgins had a set of women's luggage.

Now no proper butler of Higgins' ability would send two males, his master and himself, off to Europe with a lady's luggage!

The Marshal and the outlaw's widow shared a grim memory . . . while a grave yawned darkly.

One Way Bridge

by PHIL HINER

THE PREACHER spoke as kindly as he could of the dead, avoiding any embarrassingly detailed tributes. Then the box was carried out the door to the fresh hole in the cemetery grounds.

Angie stood directly opposite me across that yawning cavity, her desolate eyes scarcely leaving my face during the brief lowering service. Angie was free for the first time in four years. But I was the opposite of free, even though we had not spoken to each other

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since a certain day at the bridge.

A sharp wind moved up the grassy slope from the creek bed and rustled the dry leaves overhead. Two hundred yards below a lone car moved across the east lane of the bridge. The bridge repairs had been completed, and the road gang was gone. It seemed strange that it should all come back to me now, when a full month had gone by.

"He's heading your way in a hopped-up, forty-six Ford," Rivers had said. "This time he's carrying a machine gun." I had hung up the telephone, feeling numb inside, and automatically reached for my service revolver.

It had been the first word of our town's bad boy trouble maker in more than a year. It wasn't long enough. Ever since I'd pinned on the marshal's badge, I'd been pretty sure I'd have Rocky to deal with some day.

He'd been holed up in the hills around Ozone. He would have been safe enough in the Ozark hills, if he'd had the sagacity to stay put. Only Rocky wasn't the kind of guy who stays put for long.

School was just letting out, and shrill-voiced kids were scampering all over the square as I pulled my car away from the courthouse. Dodging those noisy youngsters made me remember the day Angie and I had first entered the school building. Mom had taken us both, being neighbors, and she'd taken Rocky too, since he'd lost his own mother only the week before.

I swung into an alley, taking a short cut to Angie's place. I had started to phone her when I heard the news, then decided to drop by instead. Subconsciously, I guess I was always looking for an excuse to see Angie.

Her three-year-old son greeted me in the front yard, and it took a couple of minutes to get away from him.

"You heard from Rocky?" I asked Angie when I got her alone in the kitchen.

"No," she said. Then she added quickly, watching me, "You've heard something. What is it, Hal?"

I told her about it.

"What do you think he'll do?" she asked.

"He'll try to see you," I told her. "He's crazy about the kid . . . and about you."

"What are you going to do?"

I couldn't meet her eyes, she looked that frightened.

"Do you think I've got much choice, me being marshal and him wanted in every state in the south? And now this!"

"You mustn't kill him, Hal."

"Look, Angie," I said, choosing my words with care. "I've got to go down to the bridge and wait. Listen carefully. He won't come here. He'll call you, and ask you to meet him. When you see him

tell him to double back, out of town. If he comes by the bridge I'll be there and I'll take him in. I'm giving him this one chance."

Angie didn't plead for any other concession. She knew me too well for that.

"I'll tell him, Hal," she promised.

Fifteen minutes had gone by since Rivers' call. At most Rocky could be only five or six minutes from town, if he were coming straight and fast. I spun the car around and stepped on the gas pedal. At Main Street, which is also the highway, I turned left past the courthouse and headed directly for the bridge. The streets were quiet; apparently no word of Rocky's coming had leaked out.

The bridge spanned a sizeable creek which divided the business district and the hillside residential area. There wasn't another auto bridge within twenty miles on either side of town. If Rocky was heading east he had to cross the bridge.

The bridge had only two narrow lanes. For a week now a road gang from the county work farm had put a road block on one of the lanes. So my job was simple. I just had to park my car where I could keep a close watch on the one open lane.

I crossed the bridge to the east side, and backed the car onto a dirt side road just beyond. From there I could watch traffic three blocks into town. Rocky might appear any minute now, but I didn't think he would. He couldn't get this close to town without succumbing to an impulse to see Angie and the kid.

My reasoning proved correct. Time dragged out. At 4:30 p.m. I got on the radio and checked with Rivers at Jamesville. He hadn't heard a word. The state trooper who patrolled that particular stretch of highway had been west of Jamesville when Rocky had relieved the small private bank of its operating cash, so he wouldn't be of any help. It was strictly up to me—unless Rocky decided to turn off the highway before he reached the bridge.

I was nine-tenths sure he hadn't turned. Why should he . . . with Angie in town, and with a road leading straight up Ozone Mountain ten miles past the bridge.

At five I checked again and just as I hung up I saw the green '46 Ford working through the traffic. I started the motor, and loosened the gun in its holster. Damn Rocky! He had seen Angie for sure, and still he was coming through.

The green Ford was halfway across the bridge when I pulled into gear and barricaded the east approach. It was Rocky at the wheel, all right. I saw the sudden alarm on his face as he first hit the accelerator; then quickly decided against trying to crash

through. He stopped a foot from my fender.

"Get out!" I ordered. Angie was in the seat beside him.

"You wouldn't shoot me, Hal," he said. He climbed out slowly and easily. The cocky half-smile I had known for so many years hadn't left his face.

"I ought to shoot you for the four years of nothing you've given Angie," I said.

I walked around the car. The machine gun was lying on the front seat, and Rocky also had a .38 tucked in at his belt.

I met his gaze squarely. "Look, Rocky, I tried to give you a break. I told you to double back, stay away from the bridge. Why didn't you?"

"I'd have done what you told me, Hal. But the trooper's moving in behind me. I'd have had to kill him."

"So you brought Angie along to persuade me?"

"Not exactly." The smile deepened. "But I knew you wouldn't shoot me with Angie standing here. Marshal, you're not burned personally because I held up the bank, are you? Old man James has got plenty more where that came from. He won't even miss it."

"No, I'm not burned about that —*personally*. Just as a town marshal."

He spread his hands. "Why not give me a break. Ten more miles and I'll be heading up Ozone."

"I've given you all the breaks I can, Rocky. These people have been paying me a good salary every week for a year now. If Angie broke the law, I'd run her in."

My hand lowered to rest on the holster, and I started walking towards him. It was like walking into a strange room with the lights out, because at that moment I knew that if Rocky made me draw I couldn't pull the trigger on him.

Rocky made a half-motion towards the gun at his belt, then backed away. His face was incredulous, unbelieving. "Cripes, Hal, I can't fight you."

"Then I can!" Angie and I had known each other from toddling days, yet I had never seen her move so fast. She had the .38 out of Rocky's waist and leveled on me before I could move a muscle.

"Drop it, Angie!" I was suddenly furious with her.

She shook her head, backing up a little. "I'll do it if you make me, Hal . . but please don't. It would kill me, too."

I could see that the threat wasn't an idle one. She meant every word of it. I got back in my car without saying a word and Rocky climbed back in his. Rocky shouted to me as I backed out of his way. "No hard feelings, Hal. You always was hard-nosed about the law. Guess you can't help it."

I parked the car back on the

dirt road, hearing at the crest of the hill beyond the crisp exhaust blast of the souped-up Ford; and suddenly Angie had her arms around me and was sobbing against my shoulder. "Don't hate me, Hal. Some day they'll get him and they'll kill him. I know that. But it mustn't be you."

THEY LOWERED the box until it rested on the bottom and threw in the first shovel of dirt. I turned away and started up the grassy rise. As I walked I realized that Angie was at my side.

"It's all right," she said. "Remember, Hal, what I told you that day at the bridge. I said someday they would get him, but it mustn't be you. You were angry then. But don't you see, Hal? We'll never have that between us now. It won't be a dark shadow now, keeping us apart."

I did see. And looking into her eyes I saw something else. She had known that I couldn't pull a trigger on Rocky. She hadn't been so sure of Rocky. Whatever the future held for us, I'd be grateful to Angie for the rest of my life.

"I DON'T RECALL YOUR NAME BUT I NEVER FORGET A NUMBER."

THE ONLY MAGAZINE *featuring* MIKE SHAYNE *in every issue*

THE NEW JIM TROY NOVELET

A Gold Coast gambler may not look like a Greek warrior. But Troy was an Homeric powerhouse in any language.

by THEODORE MATHIESON

QUICKLY REINING IN his sorrel and squinting against the morning sun, Jim Troy straightened his lean body alertly in the saddle as he watched a solitary horse and rider move across the rim of the sage-dotted hill far ahead. In the crystal air of the high desert country, the outline of the horseman was sharp but microscopic, like a mote in Troy's loneliness, sinister, too, like the presence of a single vulture in the broad sky.

Troy pulled down his stetson to his eyebrows, shading a fair-skinned face that was handsome but sharp-featured, with a faintly predatory look about it. His deep-set eyes scanned the dusty road ahead which led, straight as a croupier's stick, up the long slope to a shallow "V" in the hills. A light carriage had passed along this way not long before; the thin rims cut cleanly through the dust.

Up on the hill the horseman stopped suddenly. Troy could see his mount rear, as if the rider had jerked the reins violently in a mo-

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THE TROJAN HORSESHOE

ment of urgent decision, and the next moment horse and rider disappeared over the rim.

Troy pulled his gun from its holster, made certain its chambers were full, then started cantering briskly up the long slope, his gray eyes alertly ranging the hills on either side of the road. He wasn't going to be caught napping again the way he had been two nights ago, when three masked men had awakened him in the desert between Carson City and Bridgeport and cleaned him out of every penny he'd made in the capital city—upwards of three thousand dollars!

The shots rang out just as Troy reached the top of the grade. But they weren't meant for him. Down the long stretch ahead, about half a mile, a horse and carriage had stopped, and the driver now stood up with his hands raised while the lone horseman swept down a hill at right angles to the road, shooting as he came.

"Get down, you fool," Troy muttered, and almost as if he'd heard, the man jumped off the carriage on the far side.

Troy spurred his horse forward shooting twice in quick succession. The horseman turned his fire at once in Troy's direction. Troy felt a bullet fan his cheek but held his fire momentarily. Then as he got close enough to see that the attacking horseman wore a black mask over the upper part of his face, he shot twice more. While the blasts were still echoing the rider suddenly veered and fled back the way he'd come.

"You're damned lucky you weren't punctured, standing up like that!" Troy shouted, riding up to where the man still crouched by the front wheel.

"I thought at first he was just shooting for my attention," the man said, straightening up. He was tall and spare, dressed in the black garb and white collar of a minister. His haggard face was now flushed red, and as he thrust his disarranged white hair back with his fingers, his blue eyes looked up at Troy with righteous and aggressive steadiness.

"That boy was out to get you," Troy said, examining the bullet holes in the side of the carriage. "If I'd taken a little more time coming up the other side of that hill, you wouldn't be alive to talk about it. He was banking on that."

"I appreciate what you've done," the man said, holding out his hand. "My name is Will Skeels. I'm the Septuagint minister in Bodie, just over the hill. I don't think I've seen you in town, sir."

"Never been there," Troy said, shaking the old man's hand and finding his grasp firm and vigorous. "But that's where I'm headed. We might as well go on together, in case that hombre thinks of coming back."

Troy tied his horse to the rear

of the carriage and got in beside Skeels.

"You carrying something valuable?" he asked, nodding at a large parcel in the back of the carriage.

"Nothing that would interest a road agent," Skeels said. "Just books. I went to Bridgeport to pick them up myself because the freight rates to Bodie are beyond a minister's pocketbook." He flicked the buggy horse into action.

"Then why should anyone attack you?" Troy asked thoughtfully.

"Any number of reasons, I suppose," Mr. Skeels said easily. "You can't live in a town like Bodie without making enemies. For one, I've been heading a committee for law and order. Governor Richardson in Sacramento is a personal friend of mine as everybody knows, and I've written him the plain facts about Bodie. Yes, sir, plain facts. Twenty-seven murders committed in the last year, and not one has seen a conviction!"

Troy whistled. "I don't think Virginia City could beat that record," he said.

"Or then again, take Jake Turner, the blacksmith," the minister said. "Jake drove a nail so deep into the hoof of my riding horse Juno, that he lamed her. I refused to pay him what I owed him, and brought suit against him. He walked into my church in the middle of a sermon last Sunday, shook his fist at me, and walked out again. Yes, I guess that masked fellow could have been Jake, all right."

"You don't seem very concerned," Troy said.

The minister looked at him surprised. "Why, God will protect me. Didn't he, just now, when you came over the hill in time? By the way, I don't think I caught your name?"

"Troy. Jim Troy."

"Troy!" the old man trembled in an outpouring of sudden eagerness. "That's a Greek name! Minoan to start with, but Homer made it a part of the Greek language."

Troy shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know. There's a town in France called Troyes, where my father's people came from," he said.

"But I'm sure that it was Greek originally. That may, you see, your saving me is clearly the hand of Providence! I'm making a new translation of the New Testament, from the Greek, and through you, son, God has spared me to continue my work!"

"Glad to be of service, Mr. Skeels."

"Do you come to find a job in Bodie. Mr. Troy?"

Troy glanced in quick resentment at the older man. Out here in the West men seldom asked personal questions, and when they

did they were usually asking for trouble. But Skeel's eyes were so filled with frank, open friendliness that Troy's displeasure faded as quickly as it had come, and he smiled wryly.

"I guess I did, at that," he said. "Seeing as how I was robbed night before last and don't have a penny. I plan to sell my horse when I hit Bodie."

The minister looked keenly at him and then struck him sharply on the knee. "No need to do that," he said. "I live alone; my wife died here two years ago. You'll come and stay with me until you find your job. And I won't take no for an answer."

Troy smiled his thanks and glanced back at the pack strapped to his saddle. He wondered if the minister would be so willing to offer him shelter if the old man knew what kind of work he did . . .

THE SUN STOOD high and hot when Troy and Reverend Skeels reached Bodie, but a cool breeze blew across the open plain on which the town lay, stirring up dust devils in the long. store-fronted main street that stretched to the north. Miners on the off-shift, business men, Chinese, stopped on the board walks and watched Troy and the minister with undisguised interest as the latter, waving and calling out a greeting now and then, drove almost to the center of the town, and then turned off on a street to the west. Skell stopped in front of a trim, clap-boarded little church and jumped agilely to the ground.

"I live right over there," he said pointing across the dusty street to a simple one-story house with a picket fence around it. "But first I want to show you my church!"

Troy followed Skeels into the church, where it was warm from the sun beating upon the roof, and the scarce light from the few long, narrow windows cast an enhancing murk over the raw lumber of the walls and benches and the tiny altar. There was the strong smell of turpentine and Troy saw that the benches to the right of the aisle had been stained red mahogany, while those on the left had not.

"Got to get that staining done before Sunday," Skeels murmured, and then pointed overhead to the choir loft, where the front railing had been removed, so that the balcony looked like a high stage.

Going to put in a hardwood railing with real balustrades," Skeels said proudly. "God's house should excite the aesthetic feelings as well as the spiritual."

The swinging doors from the vestibule opened suddenly and a woman entered and stood, her hands clasped rigidly, her body poised as if for instant flight.

"Father?" she said in a taut voice.

At the sound of her voice,

Skeels' face saddened and his figure lost its enthusiastic verve. A look of pity came into his eye as he reached out and took his daughter's hand in his own.

"Emmy, this here is Mr. Troy, who's going to stay with me for a few days. My daughter, Mrs. Osborn."

Emma Osborn acknowledged the introduction with a smile and a nod, but Troy could see her heart wasn't in it. She was a small, but buxom woman perhaps in her mid-twenties, with dark, handsome eyes and a full, mobile mouth. Her hair was dark—in the gloom Troy could not determine what color—and she wore it swept up into a full pompadour.

Troy was close enough to smell the sweet, powdered scent of her, and feel her physical magnetism. For a moment she focussed on him and the intent look in her dark eyes thrilled him.

"I'm glad father will have a visitor," she said. "He sometimes gets very lonely, living by himself."

The next moment she had forgotten him in her immediate concern. "Could I speak with you, Father?" she asked urgently.

"Please excuse me for a moment, Mr. Troy," the minister said with a sigh, and then putting his arm around Emma he accompanied her through the swinging doors.

Troy could not help overhearing the whispered, intense voices, the sound of Emma's weeping and of her father's comforting words, although Troy could not distinguish them.

He wandered to the front of the church and sat down thoughtfully in an unstained pew.

Over supper that evening, during which Troy ate a fine beef stew in the minister's big, high-ceilinged kitchen, the Reverend Skeels sat wordlessly, still enveloped in the gloom which had descended upon him since his daughter's appearance in the church.

Troy, dressed now in a black suit with a white shirt and black string tie, sat watching the older man over the oil lamp. From around the corner on Main Street, one could hear the sound of voices, occasionally raised in some ribaldry, the jangling of a barroom piano, and now and then, a shot or two, ebullient rather than lethal. Troy became suddenly restless.

"I thought I might put it off until tomorrow," he said abruptly, flexing his fingers as if exercising them, "but you might as well know now, in case you want to kick me out."

"Know what, Mr. Troy?" the older man said, jerking himself into the present with apparent difficulty.

"That I'm a gambler by profession, and that tonight I plan to go round on your main street to the

Blue Eagle and ply my nefarious trade."

Skeels smiled bleakly. "My wife might have objected, and I might have, too, many years ago. But now—I'm sure that whatever you do to make a living, Mr. Troy, you do excellently well."

"But I do want you to know I'm an honest gambler," Troy said, wondering why he should suddenly become so scrupulous. "I never cheat. I don't have to. I have a photographic memory for card faces, a trick memory for numbers, and when I get warmed up, a pretty accurate faculty for reading my opponent's mind. My father wanted me to be a lawyer, but I found cards an easier way to make a living, and more lucrative."

"You're a man of wide experience," Skeels agreed, shaking his head. "Come into my parlor and have a cigar with me. I'd like to talk something over with you, if I may."

Seated in a comfortable armchair, Troy watched Skeels sit wearily down at his desk facing him and fidget with his papers, his Bible and concordances. In the yellow light of the oil lamp his face looked withered and old. Behind him the faintly-patterned wall-paper bore brown traces of past winters, and Troy wondered with amusement why Skeels had hung there a rusty old horseshoe with toe and heel calks. Did this man of God have secret trust in pagan superstitution?

"I told you this morning a man cannot live in a town like Bodie without making enemies," Skeels said at last with a sigh. "But I have them not only in the town, but in my own family. My only daughter married Jonathan Osborn two years ago. He's the editor of the *Gazette*. Their marriage is childless, and very unhappy. When Jonathan is drinking, which is a good deal of the time, he is a devil on earth. He beats Emmy unmercifully, and many's the time she has come here with her eyes blackened, her arms bruised. But he always comes and takes her away, and I cannot stop him because there is no law worthy of the name I can call on here in Bodie."

"Don't you have a sheriff?" Troy asked.

"Bert O'Hara wears the badge, but he is merely a front for the underworld—all the harlots and pimps and gamblers—" Skeels caught himself with a gasp. "*Cheating* gamblers, that is, Mr. Troy."

"I'm not sensitive," Troy smiled.

"Anyway, finally I gave Emmy money to go away from Bodie, to escape Jonathan. He found it, beat the truth out of her, I suppose, and came here one night quite drunk and tried to shoot me. His bullet came in through this

window—" he raised the curtain behind him and Troy could see the bullet hole, patched now by a piece of cardboard pasted over it—"and barely missed me as I sat here, working on my translation.

"He shouted that I was an interfering old devil and he would kill me sure if I gave Emmy any more money or encouraged her to run away. Well, I'm at the end of my rope, Mr. Troy. Emmy came today saying that Jonathan had beat her again, and wouldn't I help her to get away. But I have no more money to give her, and I had to send her home again. I'm afraid he'll kill her sooner or later. It's almost inevitable.

"Well—" The old man stroked his chin with embarrassment. "Here it is straight, Mr. Troy. If you're successful in your cards tonight, I wonder if you'd loan me perhaps one or two hundred dollars. I myself will ride Emmy to Bridgeport where she can catch the stage for Sacramento, and thus I might save her life."

"But how about your own, when Osborn finds out what you've done?"

"I will trust God to protect me. He always has."

"That's right," Troy said smiling. "You've got your translation to finish."

"Do not joke about it, Mr. Troy."

Troy glanced at his watch and rose.

"I'm due at the *Blue Eagle* now," he said. "I'll make the pot tonight, perhaps over two hundred, and when I do it's all yours. Don't worry, Mr. Skeels, I'm with you—from *alpha* to *omega!*"

The old man's eyes glistened and he clutched the Bible in front of him. "God bless you, Mr. Troy!" he whispered.

BY TWELVE-THIRTY Jim Troy had a stack of chips by his side amounting to over two hundred dollars, and although the betting came hot and fast now, he had a grip on the play that he never once relaxed.

Across the table, a pasty-faced, adenoidal fellow with red-brown, feral eyes watched Jim's hands with fanatical intentness as he shuffled and dealt. He held his cards tightly, close to his chest, and as his pile dwindled steadily into the pot, his play became more and more spasmodic, until at last he rose with an abruptness that almost upset the table, spit in disgust, and scuffed stiffly across the sawdust floor and out through the swinging doors, holding his shoulders straight.

"Looks like old Turner's got a belly-full!" a short, slight fellow among the onlookers laughed. The star upon his brown, stained vest proclaimed him sheriff and Troy had been aware of his presence a good part of the evening as Bert O'Hara stared at him from various parts of the barroom.

"Fire in the head!" a raucous voice yelled, which meant everybody was invited to drinks on the house.

There was a noisy concerted rush to the bar and Troy found himself momentarily alone, looking up again into Sheriff O'Hara's unwavering tawny eyes.

"You're pretty clever with them paste-boards," the Sheriff said chuckling in a friendly fashion. "You never make a slip."

"That's because I don't cheat," Troy said.

"Do tell. Then it's almost as if you could read a man's mind!" The sheriff picked up a card from the green baize and looked at it. "What have I got?"

"It's hearts," Troy said without an instant's hesitation. "Deuce, I think."

The sheriff threw the two of hearts down upon the table, his eyes narrowing. "What are you pulling, mister?"

"The cards are supplied by the *Blue Eagle*, Sheriff. They're regulation, not marked. Sometimes I'm just a lucky guesser."

O'Hara turned suddenly and zig-zagged unsteadily to the back of the barroom towards the proprietor's office. Troy didn't doubt he would check up on the decks. He smiled as he watched the players come drifting back to the tables. . . .

At two-thirty, with a fat wallet in his pocket, Troy stepped out on the board walk in front of the saloon and took a deep breath, At over eight thousand feet, the cold was razor sharp, even in midsummer, and his breath steamed.

He walked then down the shadowed, shuttered block, his footsteps drumming hollowly on the wooden walk, stretching his eyes amid the dazzling star-pricked sky, studying the moon where it hung close to the horizon, about over the spot where Mono Lake would lie. The orb looked yellow and misshapen, as if it were shrinking back from contact with the icy waters of the lake, and suddenly Troy found himself shivering in his thin, black suit. Not only from the cold. He was thinking of death.

A shadow lurched silently out of a store front ahead of him, and Troy's palm slapped his gun butt.

"It's me— Jake Turner!" a voice said drunkenly.

"What's your business?" Troy snapped.

"They tell me you're livin' with that old bible-pounder Skeels!" Turner accused. "Well, let me tell you. I'm a blacksmith, see? And I'm strong. So you tell your partner that unless he stops tryin' to sue me and pays me what he owes me, I'm going to wring his scrawny neck."

"You keep away from Mr. Skeels or you'll get a bullet in your hide," Troy admonished.

The blacksmith began to titter.

"Skeels couldn't shoot a rabbit!"

"But I can," Troy snapped, "and skunks as well!"

The blacksmith mouthed a curse and staggered off across the street and Troy continued on his way.

He saw the light in the church the moment he turned the corner. It shone dimly through the narrow side window, looking like a thin ghostly finger, held up in warning.

Troy hesitated, then crossed the street and opened the outer door, peering into the black vestibule.

"Mr. Skeels?" he called softly. The smell of mahogany stain was stronger than it had been that afternoon, and thinking of the hazard of a flame amid the fumes of turpentine, he felt his way across the vestibule and pushed open the swinging doors.

The minister lay face down at the foot of a pew he had been staining, the brush still in his hand, and his blood mingled with the red stain from a can that had spilled beside him.

Troy stepped forward then froze, listening for the sudden sound in the quiet church that had stopped him. Hope shot through him as he recognized it. The man on the floor was still breathing.

WHEN REVEREND SKEELS opened his eyes around eight o'clock the next morning, Troy and Emma were sitting beside his bed.

"I'm alive," he said simply, and then tears rolled down his cheeks as Emma fell on her knees beside the bed and seized her father's hand. His eyes turned towards Troy. "I'll bet you saved me again, too, Jim—didn't you?" he said.

"I found you, called the doctor," Troy said. "The bullet didn't go into your chest very deep."

"That's because he shot me from above—from the choir loft," Skeels said. "I was on my knees, busy painting, and I looked up and there he was, smiling down at me."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No. He wore the mask over his nose and eyes again, and didn't speak a word. But he took his time before he shot, as if he enjoyed it, and I had a good look at him. He was a big fellow—broad, you know with black hair. I remember thinking he must be pretty stubborn, because he had a big chin."

"Does anybody you know have a big chin?" Troy insisted.

The minister looked at Emma and his eyes fell. His lips were set in firm lines.

Emma Osborn said, without glancing at Troy; "My husband has a prominent chin. But I don't think he'd really shoot my father."

"He already has shot through the window at him," Troy said, and Emma looked up at him sharply, and then at her father.

"Jim is my friend," he said, patting her hand. "I've told him about Jonathan and you."

The front door bell rang then and Emma went to answer it. The minute they were alone, Troy said, "I've got the money here—for your daughter. Whenever you want it."

"I couldn't get her to go until I'm on my feet, I know," Skeels said. "Besides, I want to take her to Bridgeport myself. It wouldn't look right, if anybody else did it."

Emma returned then, and behind her came Sheriff O'Hara, holding his hat in his hand. He gave a curt nod to Troy.

"Doc Moreby told me what happened, Will," O'Hara said, standing uncomfortably at the bedside. "Sorry to hear about it. But thought I'd come over and ask a few questions."

As Skeels told his story again, describing his assailant, mentioning also his attack on the road the day before, Troy studied the slight frame of the sheriff thoughtfully. O'Hara, with his sparse gray hair, his quick nervous body, and thin unemphatic chin certainly could not have been the man who tried to murder Skeels.

That was self-evident.

And yet Troy did not trust him. Even a man who fronted for other shady characters could have some kind of integrity, put out a force of his own, but this man, Troy felt, had none. Bert O'Hara was an empty closet.

"I can't imagine who'd do a thing like this," O'Hara said.

"Jake Turner, the blacksmith, was wandering around the streets early this morning," Troy suggested.

"Jake?" O'Hara's busy eyebrows rose in exaggerated surprise. "Why now, it couldn't be Jake. This was a shootin'. Jake is so gun-shy he foams at the mouth at the sight of a bullet!"

O'Hara laughed thinly, and then cleared his throat with embarrassment. "Well, we'll keep our eyes open, Will. Maybe this was just some anti-religious nut, y'know? There was one running loose in Aurora last year; he burned a coupla churches to the ground. They caught him, though." he added reluctantly. O'Hara bowed and scraped his way to the door and a moment later he was gone.

"I don't like that man," Emma said flatly, Then she turned to her father and found he had closed his eyes. The interveiw wtih O'Hara had exhausted him. She put her fingers to her lips and motioned Troy to follow her into the hall.

"I'll stay with father today, Mr. Troy," she said. "Perhaps you'd better lie down and get some sleep. You've been awake al night."

Troy looked deeply and silently

into the brown eyes turned up to him, and Emma flushed.

"I reckon I will, Emma," he said at last. "And if you need me for anything, just call."

The murderer struck again that afternoon. Troy awakened at two o'clock, washed, dressed and left his room. He found Emma dozing in a rocking chair in the parlor with a white shawl over her shoulders. He thought how pretty she was with her face relaxed and untroubled.

But she felt him looking at her and awoke with a start.

"Oh!" she said. "Father is sleeping nicely. You look more rested yourself, Mr. Troy."

He asked her then to recommend a restaurant, since he felt hungry, and she suggested *The Standard*, two blocks north on Main Street.

She accompanied him to the door and as he went down the stairs, she said: "Be careful, Jim."

At *The Standard* Jim ordered a club steak and French fries, and had just finished them and was drinking his coffee when Emma burst into the restaurant, her hair disarrayed, her eyes wild.

"Jim!" she cried, trying to keep her voice low. "Jonathan just came for me. Pulled me out of the house away from father. He's all alone. I ran away from Jonathan to tell you. Please go to him. Watch him carefully!"

Troy rose quickly, threw several bills down on the counter. "Where's Jonathan? Didn't he follow you?"

"I ran around the block to lose him. He's probably looking for me."

"Do you want to wait here, or come with me?"

"I'll come with you," she said.

Together they ran the two blocks to the minister's house. When they reached it, Troy stopped abruptly in front of the door which stood open.

"Did you leave it open?" Troy demanded.

"I don't remember. Jonathan just came and pulled me out. He's been drinking. He said I could leave father to you!"

"Stay here, do you understand?"

Emma nodded and Troy walked warily into the house and down the hall to the bedroom.

The old man's bed was empty, the covers pushed down, but the sheet was stained with blood and there was the smell of gunpowder in the room. Then Troy saw the streak of red across the threshold, another streak a foot or two down the hall, towards the living room. Tensing himself, he followed the crimson trail to its end and found Skeels lying across the desk in a welter of his own blood.

He was dead this time.

And in his hand was the horseshoe, which he had torn from the

wall in what was probably his last conscious act.

"THE WAY I see it," Troy said later in the Sheriff's office, "Skeels recognized his murderer the last time. He got out bed, dragged himself down the hall and to his desk to write down his name, felt his life going, and grabbed at the horseshoe, which he meant should give us a clue to the one who shot him!"

"And who do you think that is, Mr. Troy?" O'Hara asked blandly, chewing on an unlit cigar.

Troy looked at the little group assembled in front of him, consisting of Emma and Jonathan Osborn, the Sheriff, and the blacksmith, Jake Turner. It was evening again, and sounds of quickening life on Main Street came in through the open window.

"Well, of course, the reference of the horseshoe is sort of plain, isn't it?"

"You mean me, don't you!" Turner said, his broad white face twisted vindictively. "Well, you can think again mister. I never use a gun. I don't like 'em. Ask O'Hara here. He'll tell you. I hate 'em!"

"We hear you say so," Troy said calmly.

O'Hara sighed and took a six-shooter from his belt. "All right, Mr. Troy. Watch this."

He held out the gun to Turner.

"Take it, Jake. Hold it."

The instantaneous fear on the face of the blacksmith was appalling to see. His lips drew back in a spasmodic rictus, and his breath came in short convulsive panting.

"G'wan Bert, let me alone," Turner whined. "Take it away."

"I said hold it!" O'Hara thrust the butt of the gun into Turner's palm with one hand and closed his fingers around it with the other. The blacksmith screamed, his eyes rolled, perspiration sprang in globules from his hairline, and he fell abjectly to his knees.

"That's enough!" Troy said, stepping forward and pulling O'Hara away from his victim. Free of the gun, the blacksmith lay spent and gasping at the foot of his chair.

"I'm convinced," Troy said. "If he were that good an actor he'd be wasting his time as a blacksmith."

"The horseshoe doesn't seem to mean anything, then, does it, Mr. Troy?" O'Hara asked smoothly, putting his gun back in his holster.

"It means something," Troy insisted. He looked at Osborn, the newspaperman, a big fellow with black hair and a sullen, defiant manner. He fought to control a rising anger.

"You don't have to look at me, either," Osborn said, thrusting out his chin. "I can prove I wasn't anywhere near that place when it happened."

"Can he?" Troy asked O'Hara.

"As it happens, he can. He came for Mrs. Osborn to take her home, and accompanied her down Main Street in view of a good percentage of the population. She broke away from him to come to you—" O'Hara broke off and scratched his chin insinuatingly.

"Mrs. Osborn was upset because her father had been left alone," Troy said evenly, looking straight at Osborn, who lowered his eyes.

"Well, anyway," the Sheriff went on, "Mrs. Osborn ran away and Jonathan couldn't find her, so he dropped into the *Potato Peak Saloon* and had several beers. I have at least twenty people including Father Mulcahey of the Catholic Church, who will swear that Jonathan didn't leave that saloon for the next hour."

O'Hara's supercilious manner suddenly vanished and he became almost ingratiating. "Look, Mr. Troy, as I said this afternoon, this is probably the work of some religious fanatic. I'll screen all the newcomers in the next coupla days, and if he's around we'll find him. I'm sorry for Mrs. Osborn and all the members of Mr. Skeel's congregation and his friends—but there's no use settin' up obstacles where none exist."

"That's the way my paper is going to play it up," Osborn said flatly. "Religious fanatic. Will had no enemies in Bodie."

"He had three I know of," Troy said. "You, Osborn, were one; Turner was another, and you, O'Hara, were a third!"

"Me!" O'Hara couldn't have looked more stunned if Troy had hit him on the head with his own gun belt.

"Skeels stood squarely for law and order," Troy said. "Twenty-seven murders in one year in Bodie and no convictions, he said. Don't you feel kind of responsible for that record, O'Hara?"

"Ain't that sort of double talk, coming from a gambler?" O'Hara sneered.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm no pillar of society. I'm not going to lead any band of righteous citizens against the dark forces of Bodie. But once in a while I meet a man who's pretty fine, like Mr. Skeels. And when somebody kills him in cold blood I'm out to get the one who did it. Will Skeels was murdered. And no matter how the cards look, I have a plain hunch that one of you three did it! I'm aiming to follow up that hunch. If I'm right, there might not be a conviction, but I can tell you there'll be justice done!"

Troy picked up his hat and started for the door. Emma stopped him half way, stepping in front of him, so that momentarily their bodies pressed together, and he laid his hand on her waist and looked down at her. Jonathan Osborn stirred but said nothing.

"I appreciate what you said

about father," she said. "Please use his house to stay in. He'd want you to."

"Thanks, I will," Troy said and went out on the street.

THE CLOCK IN the hall tingled eleven, and Troy stirred in his chair at Skeel's desk and stroked his cheek for the hundredth time. To his left on the sofa lay his hat and gun belt where he had dropped them on his way out to the *Blue Eagle* earlier in the evening. He'd never left the house. The sight of the stain upon the desk had made him pause, the memory of the old man's clear blue eye would not let him go.

He sat now feeling the heat of the lamp upon his cheek, playing his fifteenth game of solitaire, apparently absorbed in the cards, but in reality with his mind aloof, ranging and probing and seeking, sorting and rejecting. That one of these three did it—Osborn, O'Hara, Turner—he had been certain. It was like a sure hunch at cards. And yet always he came to the same dead end.

How could they have done it?

Osborn had the big chin of Skeel's description, and the dark hair and was the right physical build. He'd already shot at Skeels before. But today he'd come to take his wife home with him. Could he have known that Emma would run away from him on the street, and thus provide him with an opportunity to shoot Will Skeels?

It didn't seem likely. Besides, Troy had checked with the Catholic priest Mulcahey just after leaving the Sheriff's office, and the father had assured him that he had seen Jonathan in the *Potato Peak Saloon* during the hour of the murder, when he stopped in to collect for a sodality benefit.

O'Hara was an equally likely suspect. The Sheriff was an obvious tool of the Bodie underworld, and could easily have been ordered to terminate the interference of the leader of a strong movement towards law and order. Governor Richardson's interference might well defeat the underworld rule in Bodie. O'Hara had offered no alibis for his whereabouts at the time of the shooting, although Troy didn't doubt he could dig one up if he had to. But thinking in this direction seemed futile, too. O'Hara didn't even faintly fit the description that Skeels had given of his murderer.

And finally—Jake Turner. The blacksmith's sense of being treated unjustly by Skeels, who was bringing suit against him, clearly flamed in his mind day and night. He had threatened Skeels in his own church on the previous Sunday; had waited outside the saloon on a chill night to threaten the minister through him, Troy. But he had threatened to kill Skeels by wringing his neck! All the more reason to believe that Turner's reaction

against the gun placed in his hand had been genuine.

It seemed that the only three men who would have murdered Skeels couldn't possibly have done it! And yet—

Troy laid his solitaire deck aside and picked up the horseshoe that lay upon the Bible. "Will Skeels," he murmured, "what were you trying to tell us?"

A gun roared behind Troy as if in answer. There was a tinkle of shattering glass and simultaneously a Delft plate upon a wall rack opposite him splintered into pieces. In an instant Troy twisted the stem of the lamp wick, plunging the room into darkness, and fell to his knees beside the desk. There was a brief silence, then he heard footsteps running on the bare earth and knew that his would-be assassin had fled.

He rose slowly, his pulses pounding, scratched a match and relit the lamp, remembering with sudden vividness the conversation between himself and Skeels the night before, when the minister had told him how Osborn had shot at him. It was almost as if Troy could see the old man pull back the curtain now and point out the bullet hole; could hear his plea on behalf of his daughter, and feel the old man's gratitude when Troy told him he would help him.

Then Troy's eyes fell again upon the horseshoe lying upon the desk and he saw it with new eyes. He caught Skeels' message now! It wasn't meant for anybody! It was meant for him, personally. And now he knew who Skeels' murderer was, knew beyond any doubt.

His hunch had been right. It was one of the three.

Thoughtfully, Troy drew the shade at the window and stooping, began to pick up the cards he had scattered in his drop to the floor. He placed them face up upon the table, and when he'd gathered them all, while still on his knees, he chanced to glance at some of them under the light of the lamp.

He remained crouched, as if frozen, staring at the haphazard layout as realization, like strong drink, gradually flooded his brain. Then he rose slowly, clutching at the desk with all his might, grinning tight-lipped, the expression in his eyes triumphant.

He understood why it seemed impossible for the murderer to have committed his crime!

It all fell into place.

Now what remained was to see justice done, as he'd promised.

Slowly and deliberately he began to examine the contents of every drawer in the minister's desk.

THE FUNERAL OF Reverend Skeels was held two days later in the afternoon, and a long procession of friends and members of his congregation followed the plumed

hearse up the hill to the Bodie Cemetery.

As the minister from the Congregationalist Church recited the twenty-third psalm at the head of the grave, Troy's eyes ranged around the encirling throng, and he espied Jake Turner looking on with an ashen face and slack, open mouth. O'Hara stood close by holding his hat over his heart, with his eyes cast downward. And down at one end Troy could see Jonathan Osborn, his hands in his pockets, regarding the proceedings with his customary sullen expression while a little apart from him stood Emma, all in black with a veil over her face.

He was aware of the motions of the girl's white handkerchief gleaming in the bright sunshine, and several times he felt her eyes upon him. Finally towards the end of the service, she pushed back her veil and looked at him openly across the grave, and the anguish and pleading in her eyes moved him to pity—and to something else.

Then the funeral broke up and crowds moved down the hill. Outside the fence of the cemetery groups of men began to form; these merged presently into one group, and at the center of it, Jim Troy, his face flushed, talked quietly but with controlled ardor and conviction that commanded the attention of the others.

At eleven-thirty that night Jim Troy flagrantly broke a law. He crept up to a house on the outskirts of the town, and slipped into it through an unlocked window in the kitchen. He was careful to leave no trace of his intrusion. He went quickly into a bedroom and opened the door to its closet. Inside he carefully lit one match, and found at once what he wanted. He slipped out of the house as quietly as he had entered, and returned to the Blue Eagle, where he played winning poker until three in the morning. His run of luck was steady.

By eight o'clock on Friday evening, the day after the funeral, Reverend Skeels' church was packed with men—at least two hundred of them. They were solid citizens, sober-faced now and determined. Up in the choir loft sat Emma Osborn and her husband, who had been escorted to the gathering by five insistent gentlemen of the community.

Jake Turner was also present, likewise escorted, and Bert O'Hara, who had been persuaded to come in the interest of his public duty. These visitors, all of them uneasy, kept glancing at the choir-loft doors which were blocked by ordinary business men of Bodie with civically righteous expressions. If the guests felt trapped, it was for a good reason. They were.

A member of the group came forward to the pulpit and led the

gathering in a prayer. Then another introduced Jim Troy.

Troy stood looking for a moment at the assembled citizens, and his sharp features in the lamplight overhead looked more predacious than ever. He glanced up in the choir loft where the murderer sat watching him, and began speaking quietly and without undue emphasis.

"The other night while I was sitting at the desk where my friend Will Skeels died, I found the list of the committee, which he headed, of those men of the community who wanted law and order brought to Bodie. And because I knew that these men liked and respected Will Skeels as I did, and would want to see his murderer pay for his crime, I contacted each member of this committee individually, some at their homes, some at the cemetery, to come to this meeting.

"And now, three times the number of Will Skeels' original committee appears to see that justice is done. How you do it is your business. I'm just a gambler without any civic ties. But I happen to know who the murderer is, and I want you to know."

He nodded somberly.

From the rear of the church Troy could see Emmy looking at him with wide eyes. Jonathan sat straight as a ram-rod, squeezing his knees; O'Hara was frowning at Turner and the latter, for once, had his mouth closed and looked reasonably intelligent.

Troy's voice rang out clearly. "The man who murdered Will Skeels is Sheriff Bert O'Hara!"

There was a dead silence, then O'Hara was on his feet, shouting. "That man is crazy! Why should I want to kill Reverend Will Skeels?"

"I imagine because you were told to," Troy said. "Will Skeels was the active leader of a movement which threatened to end crime rule in Bodie. He wrote to Governor Richardson in Sacramento for help. The Governor was an especially good friend of Will Skeels; they were once in business together. He would have helped Will. But Governor Richardson never got his letter. I know this because I wired Sacramento yesterday. Perhaps you can tell us what happened to that letter, O'Hara?"

"I don't have to answer that fool!" O'Hara shouted. "Skeels was attacked the night before he was murdered! Doctor Moreby!"

O'Hara pointed an imperious finger at the physician below him. "Tell them the description given you by Will Skeels of his attacker!"

Moreby rose, a lank lugubrious looking individual, and spoke up in a nasal sing-song. "That's right, Sheriff. It couldn't have been you. Will said the man was dark-haired, big fellow, with a mighty

stubborn chin. You can see for yourself—"

"Wait!" Troy came half way up the aisle towards O'Hara, who stood close to the edge of the balustradeless loft. "Last night I looked at some heart cards from a certain angle."

A deck of cards appeared as if by magic in his hands. He was handing them out to an eager audience, right and left. "Imagine the heart is a face, with the point the chin. Now hold the card up on a level with your eyes, the point towards you! Do you see how the point disappears, becomes thick and rounded? The same thing happens when you look up at a man who stands at a height, directly over you.

"Remember, when Skeels was shot here in the church, he was kneeling at the foot of a pew, looking almost straight up at O'Hara, where O'Hara is standing now. Look! You see! At this angle see how big O'Hara's slight frame becomes, how broad and heavy, and in the poor light, illuminated from below, his hair, in shadow, turns black."

Cries of recognition and confirmation rang out from the men in the pews directly below the loft who saw the illusion for themselves.

"That's just a guess!" O'Hara cried again. "It could have been Osborn, or Turner. They would have looked the same!"

At a signal from Troy, a member of the committee handed the gambler a pair of thick boots.

"Hold it, O'Hara!" he shouted. The gathering murmur in the church subsided in anticipation of further revelation. Troy waited for complete quiet before he spoke again. "Are these your boots?"

"How can I tell?" O'Hara grumbled.

Troy threw one up to the sheriff. "There are your initials scraped on the inside. Are they yours?"

"Yesh—I guess they are. Where in the hell did you steal them from?"

"I borrowed them from your closet. You wore them on the night you shot Skeels from the loft there. He had just that day stained the floor of the loft with mahogany red, and it was still wet. Now look at the soles. Do you see the stain? You picked up a good deal of it."

O'Hara glanced at the soles of his boot and his face fell. He looked at Troy and the mass of upturned, waiting, accusing faces. And then he made his mistake. He turned suddenly and ran towards the round, open window at the side of the choir loft. Instantly the church was in an uproar. The guards in the loft caught the sheriff when he was half way through the window and dragged him back. When Troy lost sight of him in the confusion, he shrugged and

went out quietly through a side door.

JIM TROY WAS in his room in Skeels' house packing his gear when Emma appeared at his open door.

"You—going, Jim?" she cried.

"Yeah. Bodie's finished for me. I think I'll head for Sacramento. There are some river boats there I have a hankering to ride."

"Take me with you."

There was no mistaking the light in her eyes. She came and put her arms around him and kissed him warmly. He held her for a long while.

Then there was a step in the hall and they parted. Jonathan appeared breathing heavily. "They're lynching the sheriff!" he cried.

Troy sighed. "Hurray for law and order."

"Come on, Emmy, let's watch."

"No, Jonathan. I'm going with Jim."

Troy looked from Jonathan to Emma, saw the bruises on her neck and arms, and back to Jonathan again.

"You plan to take her?" Osborn said, his eyes wild.

"And what if I do? Her father wanted her to go. You know that."

"I'll kill you!"

"Draw now then. I'm ready for you," Troy snapped, his arms and hands poised.

Some of the wildness went out of Osborn's eyes then. His shoulders slouched, and the familiar look of petulant sullenness crept into his face. After a moment or two, he lowered his eyes and went out slowly.

"He'll go get drunk now."

Later they rode in the moonlight in Will Skeels' carriage through Devil's Gate and down the slope away from Bodie. Troy's sorrel followed behind, tied to the rear of the buggy.

At first they rode silently, but finally Emma said thoughtfully: "You never said how you knew O'Hara murdered my father."

"It was the message he left for me. The horseshoe."

"But how could a horseshoe tell you who did it?"

"Well, as a horseshoe it didn't mean anything. But when you realized that a horseshoe, especially one with toe and heel calks represents, in three dimensions, the actual figure of the Greek letter OMEGA, then it says something. Your father heard me say I'd be with him all the way from alpha to omega. He took a chance that I'd know the figure of the letter omega, which is *O* in Greek. And I did."

"But Osborn begins with *O*, too," Emma said.

"Short *O*. Omega is the long *O*, as in O'Hara."

"You're clever," Emma said, kissing him. And then she sat away and thought some more,

and after a while, she said: "Dad never painted that choir loft floor with stain. He planned to leave it plain."

"I stained it," Troy said smiling. "Just as I stained the bottom of our friend O'Hara's shoes."

"You cheated!"

"I often do—except at cards," Troy said putting his arm arround Emma to protect her from the night cold.

MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS

Next Issue's Headliners

ODDS ON MURDER by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Complete Novelet

THE TRUTHFUL SPY by ROBINSON MacLEAN

A Complete Suspense Novelet

UNLUCKY STAR by JOSEPH COMMINGS

LISTENER'S CONTEST by ANNE SMITH EWING

CONVERSATION ON THE CLIFF by ADRIAN ALINGTON

A child can be missing in more than one way. And often, to parents, the agony may be unbearable.

A Break in the Ice

by HAL ELLSON

MRS. HANLEY looked up as the kitchen door opened and saw Mabel standing there, smiling for no reason. The girl's eyes were too glassy, teeth too small and already going bad.

"Hello, Mrs. Hanley," she said in her grating voice and advanced into the kitchen.

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Mrs. Hanley's eyes flicked to the door. Mabel noticed and turned back to close it. She slammed it shut, smiled again and looked around like a wild creature caught in an alien place.

Poor thing, Mrs. Hanley thought. She was a young woman endowed with patience and not easily disturbed. Mabel never disturbed her as she did the other women in the village.

Mabel had always brought Johnny home safely before. And somehow, being a sympathetic and understanding woman, Mrs. Hanley could not feel, as did the neighbors, that the girl was basically irresponsible. She felt, too, that Mabel needed one friend she could trust completely—one friend who believed in her, and had confidence in her good intentions.

The girl looked at Mrs. Hanley again.

"Can Johnny come out?" she asked.

"As soon as he puts his hat and coat on."

Mabel's eyes wandered once more, as if seeking something that had escaped her.

"It's going to snow," she remarked now. "I like snow."

Mrs. Hanley nodded, and Johnny entered the kitchen carrying his hat and coat. Mabel greeted him. Her glassy eyes brightened.

Suddenly she went to Mrs. Hanley. "Can we go to the woods?" she asked.

"If you wish. But don't stay too long."

"Oh, no, we won't stay long at all."

Mabel's eyes went around the room again. Crows were cawing over the woods now, and Mrs. Hanley turned to the window.

"Oh, it's just the crows," said Mabel, smiling. "My father shot two this morning."

She plucked some black glistening feathers from a pocket and held them up.

"Look, I've a whole box of them."

"What in the world are you going to do with a whole box of them?" asked Mrs. Hanley.

Mabel didn't know. She smiled vacantly and turned to Johnny to help him with his coat.

Poor thing, thought Mrs. Hanley again, and Johnny came to her. He'd donned his coat and wanted her to button it. When she buttoned it for him, she turned to Mabel.

"Don't stay too long," she said. "And whatever you do, don't go near the pond."

"Oh, the pond's frozen. My brother went skating there last night with Mary Willians. She's his girl, you know, and I like her. She always gives me candy."

"Still, I'd rather you stay away from the pond," said Mrs. Hanley, propelling Johnny toward Mabel with a gentle push.

Johnny gave her his hand, and

Mabel opened the door. A black clot of trees loomed in the distance. The grey sky rose beyond it. This time Mabel remembered to close the door. She banged it shut.

Her voice came from beyond it as she spoke to Johnny. Footsteps retreated and faded out. There was nothing to be heard now but the mournful cawing of the crows.

Mrs. Hanley hurried to the window. The road was already taking Mabel and Johnny away.

Like a little old man, she thought, smiling at her son trudging in his heavy boots.

Later, her sister Ellen dropped in. She was on her way to the village.

"It's so quiet in here. Where's Johnny?" she asked.

"Mabel took him for a walk," Mrs. Hanley replied. "Would you care for some tea?"

"No, I'm really in a hurry. I'll have to leave. It's going to snow. I can feel it in the air."

"Well, it's about time. We haven't had much all this year."

"Not very much. You said Johnny's with Mabel?"

"Yes."

"Goodness, can you really trust that one?"

"Trust her?"

"I mean allow her to take him for a walk?"

"Oh, they're not going far."

"But you know how she is. Not too bright. Not that it's her fault, but she can't remember a thing. Last week I sent her to the village for a loaf of bread and she brought back a box of salt."

"I know, Mrs. Sohmers told me." Mrs. Hanley laughed. "She never brings back the right article, but she knows where she lives and where I live."

"Of course, but still and all. Oh, well, you know what you're doing." Ellen moved to the door.

"See you tonight?" Mrs. Hanley asked.

"If Jim comes home early. I'll phone and let you know. Goodbye now."

The door closed. Mrs. Hanley went to the window. As Ellen drove off in her car her words returned like a disturbing echo. Mabel and Johnny were not in sight.

It's early yet, she told herself and went back to her work in the kitchen. But not for long. The window drew her once more. This time she remained there and without realizing it, began to wait.

The morning remained grey and silent and a strange heaviness weighted the air. The fire gave off no heat. Soon white flakes began to drift from the sky.

Mrs. Hanley felt better now, lifted and warmed, but this didn't last. Her blood began to freeze. The clock ticked furiously. She tried not to hear it and watched the rutted road that streaked away into the wood in a sudden curve. thinking, *They can't possibly get*

lost. Mabel knows the way back and she's old enough to take care of Johnny.

When they didn't return soon enough, when hours had passed she tried to tell herself that nothing had happened. But every passing moment increased her fear. She kept waiting, hearing the clock to go in and look at the time.

They'll be back any minute, she kept telling herself. But they didn't return, and the clock raced on. Noon came and went. The snow kept falling. The hours beyond noon lengthened, but she ignored the passage of time. It was a device to push away her fear. She locked it up. But it returned insistently, prodding her till she could no longer go to the window.

She left the kitchen, afraid to remain there, but she was compelled to return. Chilled, she went to the stove, lifted a lid and stared into a dark flameless pit. The fire was dead, the ashes cold.

The lid dropped with a bang. Silence flooded back into the house. Then the clock resumed its articulate chatter. Not wanting to, she turned and went to it, but she knew beforehand how rigidly correct the hands would be.

Outside, it grew dark, not black but grey. Winter's short twilight was settling in, smearing away the sharp lines of the landscape. The snow fell heavily now with a soft disturbing hush. No step, nor voice penetrated the settling dusk.

Mrs. Hanley waited. Then at last she faced the door. Hatless and coatless, she rushed outside. Her breath burned in her throat as she flew down the road toward the wood and it seemed to draw away from her.

She fell and her hand grasped a frozen twig. She rose again without knowing it was in her hand, didn't remember dropping it.

She ran on and a clearing opened before her. The dusk lightened. The snow fell heavier here. White with its ermine and smooth with the shadow of blue ice showing through the immaculate cover, the pond lay below her.

A small dark area revealed the presence of water. Snow falling there melted on contact. She averted her eyes, didn't want to accept this. But she had to and looked again.

The snow fell silently, bringing with it the darkening pall of dusk. Motionless, the trees began to close in on the pond in an ever-tightening circle.

Frightened, she looked down, saw footprints and knew then what had happened. Deep in her mind, in a terror-numbed corner, she'd known since she'd fled the house.

Slowly now she turned and looked at the pond where the ice was broken and the white flakes melted on icy water.

She raised her eyes then and, like a shadow, a dim form came

into view. A voice called: "Johnny! Johnny!" from across the pond, and she felt the hands of madness on her, for no one was there.

She started to run, then stopped abruptly. A shadowy form moved toward her out of the dark. A face emerged—Mabel with her empty smile.

"Where's Johnny? What happened to him?" screamed Mrs. Hanley. *"Where is Johnny?"*

The vacant smile tightened on Mabel's face. She said nothing.

Mrs. Hanley looked round at the wood, the frozen pond, the break in the ice. Suddenly she seized Mabel and shook her violently.

"What happened to Johnny?" she screamed again.

"I forget," said Mabel.

NEXT MONTH **AN EXCITING LONG NOVELET**

THE TRUTHFUL SPY

by ROBINSON MacLEAN

The stolen invention was of vital concern to more than one government. So murder and mayhem followed naturally . . . down Mexico way.

The Silken Touch of MURDER

A SHORT, CHILLING SUSPENSE NOVEL

by FRANK WARD

MR. STRACHEY waited in darkness. He huddled deeper into his overcoat, for it was a damp, chill night in late September, with the rain blowing in spiteful gusts along the busy street. People hurried past his doorway, hustling into the wind. They came and were as quickly gone, but Mr. Strachey waited on, watching them all with his mild blue eyes.

The weariness of these times rested heavily upon him. So often had he waited, and no one had come. But every once in a while, when he least expected it, she had appeared. It was always the same girl. There would be the young, eager face concealing the evil that lay within. There would be the pert swirl of blonde hair, the late evening light glistening on silken legs as she hurried past him.

Sometimes she wore a plastic raincoat that caught and held the passing lights like some mirror of the night. At others, the rustle of a silken dress, the merest fragrance of perfume on the summer air, the steady, exhilarating click of high-heeled shoes.

© 1960, by Frank Ward

The killer was a crazed fanatic, his weapon a silken noose. Catching him seemed too big a job for just any cop. But Keyhoe wasn't just any cop. He had grown away from that label.

But in the end, it was always the same. In the end, he always stepped from his doorway and fell in behind her, remembering the motion of that familiar figure, remembering that night so long ago.

Mr. Strachey moved restlessly. He dreaded this moment of decision, this time of choice. He lived in terror of making a mistake, of following the wrong girl, of doing what must be done to the wrong one.

He caught his breath sharply. A girl had passed by, a girl who might be the one he was waiting for. He was conscious of a delicious sense of weakness. His legs, as he stepped into the passing crowd, were trembling. At that moment, she turned her head to glance in a store window, and he knew with a sense of exultation that he had made no error.

He could never fail to recognize that long, swinging stride, the movement of that young body that seemed to love the challenge of the night. He fell quickly into step behind her.

At the next corner, while they waited for a traffic light to change, Mr. Strachey was only two feet away. He could have reached out and touched her, but he kept his hands buried in his overcoat pockets. The nearness in itself was almost enough to turn his brain. His temples had begun to pound and he could feel the evil desire creeping through his small body, turning his thoughts black and horrible.

He swayed a little, brushing against a man who waited beside him. The roar of traffic increased, the lights swam like a waterfall of color in front of his eyes. The light changed. Mr. Strachey shuddered, and took a deep breath of damp air as the girl moved away. She walked quickly, so that he almost had to trot to keep pace behind her.

At the next corner she turned right and disappeared from sight. Mr. Strachey gave an inarticulate cry and began to run. He slipped on the greasy sidewalk and almost fell, drawing one hand from his coat pocket and thrusting it out to balance himself. The hand was a black hand, clad in a silken glove that reflected no light. He regained his balance and stopped, glancing quickly about.

One or two people had paused to look his way, but their eyes slid away, the traffic moved, the sound increased. He took a few steps up the dark street and stopped again. The sweat on his forehead under the sedate brim of the grey homburg was cold.

Ahead of him the girl was still walking. She had gained perhaps half-a-block on him now, but he increased his pace and the distance lessened. In a moment he would be beside her, and she would be smiling at him with that sly, inviting expression that he remembered so well. Dimly, he was aware that she wasn't really to blame.

The other boys had put her up to it, but she had been a willing tool. They had all hated him, because his brain was wise and great even if his body was puny. All of them, baiting him, luring him on, torturing him because he was not as they were, lusting after the flesh as they lusted. He had been pure and they had tried to make him evil. He drew in a shuddering breath and hurried on.

It was a long street, curving gently away from the main arteries of the city, losing itself at last in a maze of old houses that bordered on the campus. At the end of it there was nothing but the dark expanse of the college grounds, with its few isolated lights and its dark shadows.

Ahead of him the girl had stopped. Mr. Strachey blended into the darkness along the wall. The weakness had gone from him now. If he had failed to resist this temptation before, tonight he would succeed. She might flaunt her body at him now, as she had so long ago, but his own strength was too great. He would put them all to shame. He would give them the punishment they deserved.

He closed his eyes dizzily, for he knew every move that would be made now. She would be waiting for him, her young, half-formed body uncertainly arrogant. Her hands would go slowly down to the hem of her short skirt, lifting, ever lifting, the eyes dark and glistening, the hands moving.

But tonight there would be a difference. Tonight, he would not be weak. Tonight, he would not stand there as he had stood so many years ago, fascinated by the slimness of that young leg, at the implied invitation. Tonight, there would be no sniggering laughter from the shadows as the others leaped out on him and flung him to the ground, tearing the clothes from him, exposing the pitiful inadequacy of his body. There would be no laughter anywhere tonight. Only a blessed silence and a blessed relief.

Before him, the girl paused to light a cigarette under the rain-swept glow of a street-lamp. Mr. Strachey took his inevitable pace forward. He saw her face, framed in the light but distorted by the rising smoke from the cigarette, and for one brief moment the horrible doubt returned. The face was somehow different. There was an innocence here that he could not remember, after all those years.

But it was too late now. He was in motion, his feet slithering softly on the wet pavement, the black hands emerging from the depths of his coat. There was no time now for anything but this one ultimate act.

He sprang like a great cat, a silent pounce that carried his victim backward into the black mouth of a little areaway, out of sight. There

was no sound, but the scuffle of his feet. The lamp threw a pale glow on the sidewalk, the rain fell in a steady drizzle. Somewhere in the distance a radio played loudly.

When it was done, he straightened up. The silk cord with its two small wooden handles hung limply from his fingers. He took a step forward. His face, which was not actually a face at all but a blurred oval mask in the gloom of the areaway, was smiling. It was a gentle, forgiving smile.

He rolled the cord up neatly, and for a moment stood staring down at the silk stocking that was clenched in his other fist. It was a symbol, a remembrance of an evil, a sin expiated. It was his offering to the higher being that guided him in moments such as these. He felt a wave of peace moving through him, casting out all the stains of evil desire, making him, once more, as he had been long ago. His soul was undefiled, and once more he could experience the love of goodness, unsullied by the hatred for what others had driven him to do. Now, at this moment, he could forgive them all.

He took out a small flat white box and selected a cigarette. He lit it, drawing the perfumed smoke of the Egyptian tobacco deep into his lungs. Then he stepped out into the pool of light cast by that solitary street lamp, and stopped dead.

A girl was coming down the street toward him. She was perhaps twenty feet away, with her long, easy stride cutting down the distance. Mr. Strachey stopped breathing. He stared at her, the smiling draining from his lips. The street began to swim in front of his eyes.

The staccato rap of heels stopped, and Mr. Strachey opened his eyes and tried to focus them. Dimly, he knew that the girl was watching him. She had her purse half-open, and a key ring glinted in the light. She stood with one foot on the lower step of the flight that led up to the front door of an old brownstone mansion that had once catered to the elect few and now rented rooms to the many.

He was aware of the outline of her face, but her features did not make a whole. Her hair was long and dark, swinging free over the collar of her raincoat. He took an unsteady step forward, exposing himself remorselessly to the light, but afraid to go back to the thing that waited in the darkness behind him.

The girl moved then. With a quick, almost frightened motion she ran up the steps and thrust her key into the lock. It clicked. Mr. Strachey put his head down blindly and began to hurry down the street. The rain pelted at his face. He did not look back until he had gone more than a hundred feet. Then he stopped and turned

around, aware that he was still holding the stocking in one black-gloved hand, aware that he had been seen.

In the doorway of the brownstone, a shadow moved. Then a door closed, the sound of it echoing hollowly in the darkness.

Mr. Strachey thrust his hands into his pocket and began to run.

II

LYNN PRICE awoke eight hours later with a headache. She lay stiffly on the unyielding mattress of the day-bed, staring up at the ceiling. In the greyness of the new day, the room gradually took on form and substance. A shadow became a bookcase against the far wall, and in a corner, on a chest of drawers, the dial of a small radio stared back at her without expression. Beside it, the framed face of a man she had known a long time before seemed to be looking out the window, and she thought she could detect just the whisper of despair in the fixed smile. Poor Steve. He had smiled so hard and tried so hard, and in the end had gone away, leaving only his picture and his smile, fixed for eternity.

She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. The headache was only a memory now, leaving the room for the apparition she had seen the night before.

She let the memory of that face roll across the screen of her mind, but it kept trying to smile as Steve was smiling, and she could really remember no more than the staring eyes behind the heavy spectacles. There had been a mouth, of course. A small, prissy little mouth, smiling gently. And a paleness of skin that was not natural.

There had been something odd about him, standing so still, as if poised for flight like some grey little bird in a homburg hat. There had been something wrong about the hands, too, but she couldn't remember what it was. She yawned and stretched and thought about stealing another five minutes, but the alarm clock ended such speculation.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, looking down at them appraisingly. They were good legs, but like the rest of her, they were thirty-two years old and not getting any younger. She stood up slowly and walked over to the window and looked out.

The rain hung in a grey curtain over the college campus, a hundred yards away. In the mist, the trees moved restlessly, their branches shedding leaves. The iron of the fire-escape outside the window dripped. She shivered, suddenly and for no reason at all, and picked up her dressing gown, taking it with her into the bathroom. On the way she paused to flick the switch under the Silex.

While the coffee brewed, she

went about doing the necessary things. Her face stared back at her sleepily out of the bathroom mirror and was duly washed, powdered and lipsticked. As her hands worked, she appraised her face. She had watched it growing older, as if it belonged to some other lonely girl. At thirty-two, it still bore a resemblance to the Lynn Price she remembered, the gay and laughing girl, reaching out for life with both eager hands. Now the hands had been burnt, and reached for very little, and then only cautiously.

But the face remained almost the same. Perhaps the eyes were too deeply green and frank and uncompromising. Perhaps the mouth, always a little too wide for beauty, had waited too long to smile. Perhaps the chin, once so proud and firm and demanding, had been beaten down too often by life and the things that life brought. But the mirror on the wall only dimly reflected these changes.

She sighed and smiled dutifully at herself, and went out into the other room, collecting the bubbling Silex and carrying it over to the small table in the window. There was room there for one. She made toast and stood by the window, munching it absently. Then she sat down and was reaching for the black coffee and the packet of cigarettes when a firm hand rapped its knuckles against the door.

She glanced at the clock. It was only seven-thirty. She stood up, frowning, walked over to the door and said, "Who is it?"

The voice was as heavy as the hand.

"Police. We'd like a word with you."

She opened the door perhaps three inches. A man was standing in the hallway, almost filling it with his bulk. Behind him, a blue uniform, and in the background, another man who watched and waited like a slim shadow of the first.

"What is it?"

A leather folder with a shield came into the room and stopped where she could see it.

She opened the door wider then, and the burly man came in. He wore a pale and dirty trench coat, with the collar up, and no hat. His head was massive, the greying hair cropped short, the face ruddy and truculent. He stood for a moment, just inside the doorway, his deep-set eyes moving here and there with a seemingly aimless curiosity. They paused briefly as they rested on the unmade bed, the half-empty coffee-cup, the still smoldering cigarette.

Then the burly man smiled, with a frosty twisting of heavy lips.

"Sorry if we got you out of bed. You are Miss Price, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said. "But I'm afraid I don't—"

"Just a few routine questions.

You live here alone, do you?"

She nodded.

"Were you home last night?"

"From about seven o'clock on, yes."

He nodded absently and moved past her, crossing the small room in two strides to the window. He drew the curtains and looked down into the little areaway below. Without turning around he said, "Did you hear anything out of the ordinary?"

"No. What should I have heard? What is all this, anyway?"

He let the curtains swing shut. He moved slowly, heavily, twisting his big body about. He stared at her. The eyes were a peculiar shade of grey, without depth, like a coating of ice. The slight stubble on his chin was gray also.

"Did you have the radio on at all during that time . . . say, from seven until nine?"

"No," she said, her voice growing thin and edged. "I did not have my radio on. I had a headache and went to bed about nine. Alone. I had a glass of hot milk first, with rum in it. Myer's rum, Jamaica, about one ounce. There are some other personal details about the operation. Am I supposed to list those, too?"

He chuckled. It was a surprisingly warm and human sound, and it came a long way, as though it lived deep within him in some private and well-guarded place.

"No," he said. "No, I don't think that will be necessary." He put a cigarette in his mouth and let it hang there, without lighting it. His head was cocked to one side. Finally, he slapped his hand lightly against the window frame.

"All right, Miss Price. I don't think we need bother you any more." He walked over to the door and paused, looking back over his shoulder.

"You'll read about it in the papers anyway, so you might as well know. A young girl was killed in that areaway under your window last night."

He found a match and lit the cigarette without altering his gaze. "It might be a good idea for a young woman like yourself to keep her window locked. That one isn't." He stepped into the hall, and then put his head back into the room.

"I may be back. Bering is the name. Emmett Bering. If you remember anything, keep it for me."

The door closed with a click. Footsteps went up the stairs, and the heavy hand knocked against wood on the floor above. Voices murmured.

Lynn Price sat down slowly. Her cigarette had burned itself out in a curl of flaky ash. She lit another and was not surprised to find that her fingers were trembling. With the cigarette in her hand, she reached over and locked the window. She had no desire to look down into the areaway below.

There would be nothing there now but the rainwater lying in puddles.

She shivered with a sudden nausea, stubbed out the cigarette, and went mechanically about the business of dressing for work. She had forgotten all about the little grey man in the homburg hat, the man with the funny hands. He was lost in the image of a dead girl, lying huddled in the cold, alone and forsaken forever, gone into some frightening place that lay beyond the boundaries of human knowledge.

She didn't remember the grey man until she was sitting at her office desk, reading the newspaper story of Alma Linton's murder. And even then his presence intruded only slightly into her consciousness. He remained there, in the background, throughout the long day, while her hands performed the routine tasks and her mouth said the routine words.

At noon, she had her lunch in the cafeteria, and because of this she missed Mr. Strachey. He, too, had a newspaper in his hands. He stood in the lobby of the building with one eye on the clock to be certain that he was not even a minute late at his desk.

He read the story of the murder slowly, noting each detail, his fingers caressing the columns of print. There was a picture, too, showing only the entrance to the areaway and the window that overlooked it. The window stared back at him like an unwinking eye. A fire-escape was bolted to the wall outside that window, its ladder trailing to within eight feet of the ground.

A tall man, thought Mr. Strachey would have no trouble in reaching it. And even a short man might find a way.

As yet, he had not learned who lived beyond that window. But he would. There was no hurry. Whoever she was, she had remained silent about seeing him there. For some reason, there was no mention of this in the papers. Mr. Strachey smiled, almost sadly. It was a trifling attempt at deception, designed to lull him into a sense of security.

He had no way of knowing that the girl had seen only an outline of him. He could not look into her mind and know that all she recalled was a gentle smile, and a grey homburg hat, and something funny about his hands. All he knew was that he had seen her, and even through the waves of dizziness that always accompanied his moments of gratification, he could remember the long, dark hair, the tall body, the oval face. His mind ran in its narrowing circle, cutting ever deeper.

He lowered his head and read the account again, lingering over the names of the three women who had been interviewed by the police, the three women who might

conceivably have seen or heard something.

He smirked. The Three Wise Monkeys, who had seen nothing, heard nothing, and said nothing. He giggled, causing a passing woman to stare at him curiously. He would take the Three Wise Monkeys, one by one, and wring their necks.

Mr. Strachey folded the paper carefully and tucked it into the pocket of his overcoat. He trotted toward the elevator, and went up to the tenth floor and down the hallway toward the office where he worked.

At that moment, he was less than fifty feet from the woman he wanted most. But neither of them knew it.

III

AT PRECISELY two minutes after five, Raymond Boyce sauntered across the office toward her desk, and Lynn repressed a sigh of something that was more than impatience. Boyce was a big man, tall and fleshy, with bold eyes and restless hands. He was always rubbing them on the seams of his trousers, always moving the fingers, and as his fingers moved, so did his eyes.

He hitched himself onto one corner of her desk and leaned toward her.

"He-llo," he said, smiling. He smiled as the framed Steve had smiled, using a good deal of mouth and not much of anything else. He looked her over, thoroughly.

She put her notebook away and smiled back at him with equal sincerity.

"The answer," she said distinctly, "is no."

"But I haven't even asked you anything yet."

"You were going to," she said wearily. "You were going to ask me out to dinner, and then to some intimate bar, and then on to something I wouldn't like at all. She slammed the typewriter shut with a repressed crash. "And the answer to all three is the same. No. I'm not for rent, Mr. Boyce. You might get me as an outright gift if you offered anything I could really use, such as a genuine feeling for me, or a little love, or even just some honest companionship. But not for dinner and a few drinks. Sorry."

Boyce slid off the desk. He was still smiling, but there was an edge to it, and his eyes were not pleasant.

"You seem to put a pretty high price on yourself," he said. "Neither of us are getting any younger."

She could feel the blood moving under her skin, and knew from the heat of it that she was flushing with resentment. But her voice maintained its even tone.

"Go away, Boyce," she said quietly. "Now."

He stood looking at her for a

moment, his eyes as accusingly reproachful as he could make them.

"You'll change your mind," he growled finally. "They all do, when the waiting gets too hard. Only a very few women can afford to brush off a genuine interest, Miss Price. Sooner or later you'll have to take the ones who want you even a little."

He turned then and stamped away, stopping to say something to one of the other girls. Lynn bent over her desk, folding the evening paper, making motions with her hands. She could feel the impact of other eyes. She could feel the silent amusement.

She got up a little unsteadily, gathered her purse under her arm, and walked out of the office. Behind her, someone sniggered. Blindly, she went over to the elevators and stood in the gathering crush of people, her raincoat over her arm.

The elevator sighed to a stop. She moved forward, carried with the others. The doors closed. She leaned her head back against the cool metal of the elevator wall, her eyes half-closed.

The car dropped with a sickening rush and then, at the moment when destruction seemed inevitable, hissed to a gentle stop. She followed the wave of bubbling sound into the lobby, trying to ignore the laughter and the jollity, and paused beside the news counter to buy some cigarettes and a magazine.

Then she turned at last to the dreary prospect of the hours ahead. These were the hours that for most moved lightly, gaily, toward the tranquility of sleep, hours flung forward into time by the moments of shared happiness.

But for her, and for all the others like her, these were the desperate hours, to be scraped off the face of time in the solitary confinement of some movie seat, or the aimless walks that led to nowhere.

The newspaper under her arm crinkled with the sudden desperate pressure of her arm, and for a moment she thought almost despairingly of Raymond Boyce. She could have gone with him, fought him off if he became too persistent. What difference did it make if the laughter were false, or the words empty? It was better than talking to yourself.

She glanced back over her shoulder, toward the elevator doors. But they were shut and the lobby was rapidly emptying.

Only two or three remained, idling around the news counter. Her gaze paused on one—a short, birdlike little man who seemed to be standing poised on his toes, as if ready for flight. He wore a new black homburg hat, set squarely on his head, and an equally impeccable black overcoat.

For a moment, recognition flick-

ered in her mind. She watched him, frowning, but his back told her nothing. He was reading a newspaper avidly, holding it squarely before him with both hands.

She shrugged and went out into the street, throwing her raincoat cape-fashion over her shoulders. The traffic streamed past, its lights dim against the night drizzle. There were no cabs in sight, but a black car was parked directly in front of the building, its driver staring off into space.

The interior of the car was dim, but her idle gaze noticed that two shadows hulked in the back seat. She was about to start her eight-block walk home when the back door opened and a man got out and came toward her.

"Miss Price,"

She paused and looked toward the sound of the voice. It was a voice she remembered, a heavy-handed voice belonging to a man named Bering. He came up to her bare-headed in the rain.

"Oh, hello," she said, and was surprised to find that she was almost glad to see him. "You're the policeman."

He smiled crookedly. "That's right. I'm the policeman. Could I have a word with you, in the car?"

"Of course."

He walked behind her to the car and opened the door. The other man, sitting in the far corner, raised one hand to touch the brim of his hat. She climbed in beside him. Bering followed, closing the door.

"This is Jimmy Keyhoe," he said, nodding toward the other man. "Sergeant Keyhoe."

Keyhoe smiled at her in the gloom, an impersonal smile that might have been one cast off by Bering. He seemed young in everything but the quality of his stare. His eyes reflected light from the street. They were hard, watchful grey eyes. They were not smiling.

"Now," said Bering. "For a few questions we missed this morning. "You've read the papers, I suppose?"

"I've read them." She shivered a bit.

Bering nodded his head. "You can shiver some more. You can shiver for all of us, including that poor girl's parents."

"Who was she?" Lynn asked. "Why did a thing like that happen to her?"

"We don't know why it happened," said Bering. "We do know who she was. She was nobody—a girl living alone, a girl away from home." He shrugged. "Just a girl. But a very special girl to somebody."

Bering offered her a cigarette.

"We want that somebody. We want him badly. Because, you see, he's done it before."

Keyhoe made a small sound in his throat. He said, harshly, "He uses a silken cord, Miss Price. He's

used it in about eight cities that we can trace, over the past ten years. No one has ever seen him. He comes, he kills, and he goes. But we know that he has abnormal strength in his arms and hands, for medical reasons I won't go into. There is another peculiarity about him. He takes fetish trophies."

Lynn sat very still, the cigarette dying between her fingers.

"Trophies?"

"A silk stocking," Keyhoe said. His body, crushed against her in the confines of the seat, had tensed as if he were preparing to pounce.

"But why . . ."

"We've asked that question, too. We've asked some very expert people. There isn't any sane answer. But that's probably because this isn't a very sane man."

She was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "Why are you telling me all this? What have I to do with it?"

Bering threw his cigarette butt out the window.

"We think you may know something without knowing you know, if you follow me. No one has ever been near to him before, that we've heard of. Perhaps you were. You came home about seven. Alma Linton died about seven. We've traced her movements after she left her office. She ate downtown, she stopped at a lending library, she walked home. We've been over the route. It would bring her outside your doorway at around seven o'clock—give or take a few minutes. Now you can understand why we're interested in you."

"But I've already told you that I—"

"That you heard nothing. I know. But what did you see? Was the street completely empty? Did you pass anyone as you walked up it? Think, Miss Price."

"I've already told you. I had a splitting headache. It was so bad I could hardly see where I was going. And it was raining . . ." She stopped, the words chopped short.

Keyhoe exhaled. He leaned toward her. "Yes?" he said, soothingly, coaxingly, as he might talk to a forgetful child.

"The grey man," she said automatically.

Bering's teeth snapped together.

"What grey man?" he asked, his tone harsh. "What are you talking about?"

"He couldn't be the one you want," she stammered. "He couldn't. You want a big man, with powerful hands. He was only a little man. He was shorter than I am. He was just standing there, under the light. And he was smiling. He couldn't be the one."

Keyhoe rolled down the window to let dank night air into the car.

"Some people," he explained in a gentle tone, "smile when they're happy. We think our man might be happy with his work. Could you

carry it a little further, perhaps? A grey man, you say. A little grey man. How little is little, in your opinion?"

She shook her head, suddenly angry at the patronizing voice. "Don't bully me. I don't know how tall he was. I barely saw him. I told you, my head was splitting and all I was thinking about was getting home and lying down. I saw him only when I stopped to get my keys out of my purse. He was just standing there, looking at me and smiling. I thought he might be waiting for someone."

"No," Bering said. "I don't think he was waiting for anyone. I think he'd already found her. Could he have just stepped out of that areaway under your window, perhaps not knowing you were in the street at all."

She leaned forward, pressing her fingers over her eyes. The grey man came at her out of the mist, smiling his strange smile, staring at her almost in wonderment. She remembered that much about him.

"Perhaps he could. He had on a grey homburg hat and a grey overcoat. Or perhaps it was a light blue overcoat. His face was nothing but a blur with glasses on it. There was something wrong with his hands, but I can't remember what it was. That's all I know about him."

The two men were silent.

"Well," Keyhoe said at last, "we've got something to go on, at any rate. But what do you mean, there was something wrong with his hands? Could you clear that up a little?"

"I don't know. They weren't in his pockets, but I couldn't see them. It was if his coat sleeves ended in darkness, somehow."

"Gloves," Bering said. "He'd wear dark gloves, of course." He found a pipe in his pocket and shoved it between his teeth. Then he leaned toward her, the smell of dead tobacco sour in the car.

"Tell me, Miss Price," he said, almost drowsily. "Did he have a good look at you?"

In the silence that followed, she nodded slowly. Under the light, he could have looked his fill. He could know every feature.

"Yes," she said, and was conscious of a sudden great weariness.

"I see," said Bering. He thought about this for a moment. Then he reached forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. "We'll go to Four forty-two Elgin Drive, Lambert."

The car eased away from the curb and slid into the thinning traffic. The two men said nothing. Bering was slumped back, his face turned toward the window. Keyhoe smoked placidly, staring straight ahead, but the tension of his body still throbbed against her. Between them, Lynn felt forgotten, ignored.

They didn't resent her. They felt nothing at all toward her, except

the official police attitude of resignation with public stupidity. She wanted to cry, from sheer frustration, from all the dreary thoughts of the long dreary day.

She was jolted out of that misery as the driver applied the brakes and brought the car to a stop.

Bering got out, and looked up at the street lamp, throwing its circle of misty white light on the pavement, splashing it on the steps of the brownstone where she lived.

"You're right," he said. "He saw you." He helped her out of the car. "But I wouldn't worry about it, Miss Price. We'll look after you."

He put his head into the car and spoke a few words to Keyhoe, who said something in reply and got out.

Bering put one hand on her arm.

"It's too bad we didn't know about this sooner, Miss Price. But you couldn't be expected to know yourself. A girl like you shouldn't have to know about a man like that." He paused. "But I'm afraid you may have to."

He nodded abruptly and climbed back into the car, which whispered away. She stood under the lamplight, staring at Keyhoe. He was all the company she had in the world. He was the only support she could expect.

Yet, in her heart, she knew that she was all alone with this thing, locked into a small private world into which terror was just beginning to creep.

IV

Mr. Strachey closed his books with a final thump and sighed the sigh of a good day's work well done. He wiped the point of his pen carefully on an old piece of flannel, and put both articles away in his desk drawer.

He closed the drawer, removed the cuffs that protected his shirt sleeves, and disposed of them in another drawer. Then he took a flat white tin from his pocket, selected an oval cigarette, and lit it. He inhaled deeply, looking around the office with pleasure.

It was a room that was home to him, a place of precision, its four walls holding the memories of nearly two years. They were memories that brought a glint to Mr. Strachey's eyes. He could hear, from the floor below, the clatter of pails and mops as the cleaning women advanced across the battlefield left by the day's work.

He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand, blinking like a blind little mole in the bright overhead light. His face, like the top of his head, had a bald, almost naked appearance. It was the face of a creature that comes out only at night, and then to prey on those weaker than itself.

He sauntered over to the window and stared down ten floors toward the street below. It was now seven o'clock, well past closing time for the firm of accountants for which he worked. But Mr. Strachey had a reputation for taking his time and getting the job done. Hours meant nothing to him. They never had. The job was the thing, the neat, meticulous, implacable job.

He sighed, and shrugged into his jacket, and looked toward the rack where his new black overcoat hung. He felt the loss of the grey one as he would have missed an old friend. Grey was, somehow, an anonymous color, and wearing it, he felt like a chameleon blending inconspicuously into its surroundings.

Mr. Strachey's reflection looked back at him from the window, but it was the reflection of another man, nothing but a mask that hid the body, but was not actually himself. Looking even deeper, he saw the reflection of the tall, dark-haired girl who had stared at him with such fatal curiosity the night before.

What had she seen? Had her eyes gone beneath the disguise of the flesh and found the immortal spirit that burned within him? He doubted it. It was a flame that had been nourished in a hidden shrine, a secret he kept from all but those they met on the misty nights when the desire to repent became too strong to be any longer denied. In the quiet places of the night he found them, and as quietly left them. They took his secret with them to their lonely graves.

Mr. Strachey put on his overcoat. He adjusted the new black homburg to the correct angle, snapped out the light, and left, walking down the ten flights as he usually did. In the street, the breath of darkness blew on him coldly, and he shivered.

For the first time, he felt lonely and insecure. In an ocean of humanity, surging all around him, washing against the shores of many experiences, he floated alone and remote. But the detachment had been shattered at last. One other human being shared the secret of his being, one other human being who walked and talked as he did. It would be necessary to see that she did not talk too much.

He stood very still, feeling once more the impact of those eyes. His small body quivered with resentment. He felt again as he always felt in the dreams that kept him company throughout the long nights. He felt naked, with no place to hide his shame. The hands that clenched now in his overcoat pockets were never strong enough to ward off this moment of terror, this time when all men stared at him and all women laughed, because he was so pitiable.

Slowly, he drew out the slip of

paper on which he had written the names of the three women who had been questioned that morning by the police. Marlene Dalys. Mary Foster. Lynn Price. One of these, he knew, was the girl he sought. There could be only one judgment, one punishment, one executioner.

He turned and walked slowly down the street toward the bus stop.

IN HER APARTMENT, eight blocks away, Lynn Price was snapping on the lights and shrugging out of her coat. Behind her, Sergeant Keyhoe stood with his back to the door, his face passive and expressionless.

Only when she went toward the window with the intention of opening it to air the room did he move.

"Let me do that," he said.

She stood back, watching him. It was difficult not to think of him as a machine, running pleasantly and efficiently, but geared for sudden violent effort. He wore a grey tweed jacket that strained across his shoulders as he raised the window and leaned forward, looking out into the night.

His brown flannel slacks were neatly pressed, his shoes gleamed red-brown. He could have been any one of a hundred thousand well-groomed men, and she could not see him as a dehumanized robot of protection that responded normally to death and horror as others responded to the ordinary necessities of life.

She said, uncertainly, "Would you like a drink?"

He turned and smiled at her. "No, thanks. Unless you mean coffee."

"You don't drink?" she asked, almost puzzled.

"Occasionally. This isn't one of the occasions."

She flushed. "I'm sorry. I forgot. I don't suppose you could call this a social visit."

"Not exactly," he said.

He stood beside the window, not leaning on anything as Raymond Boyce would have done, not smiling as Steve was smiling from his frame on the chest of drawers.

His eyes examined her, but it was a glance that made her feel as if she had an Exhibit A tag around her neck instead of a string of beads.

She made an exasperated gesture, and said, lamely, "Well, I'll get the coffee."

She went out into the kitchenette. As she worked, she could see him from the corner of one eye. He had already stared Steve in the face and discarded him, and was now examining the titles of the books she had accumulated over the years.

She wondered how old he might be, for the young-old face gave no clues, and decided he must be at least thirty-five. The dark brown hair showed no grey. Like the rest

of him, it was neat and well-trained.

She called out, "Do you like it strong or medium?" and he answered, absently, that it didn't matter in the least. When she brought it in, he drank it standing up.

Lynn sat down on the daybed and balanced her cup on one knee.

"Don't you think," she suggested, "that it might be more comfortable if you relaxed?"

"All right," he said.

He sat down in a chair facing her. His face was in repose, so that the lines around the mouth and eyes had almost disappeared. The mouth and the eyes were the old part of him.

She made another effort at conversation.

"Do you intend staying here all night "

The level grey eyes regarded her thoughtfully.

"No. Not here."

"Then where?"

He made a gesture toward the window.

"Outside," he said. "You needn't worry about me, Miss Price. I'll be gone as soon as the inspector sends a car around. But I won't be far away."

She leaned toward him. "You really think this crazy little man will . . . come after me, don't you?"

He put his cup on a nearby table.

"He is not a man," he said, and his voice had dropped to a harsh whisper. "He is a wild beast in human form. I can't think the way he does, so I don't know what he'll do. But when he tries to do it, I'll be there. You can count on that, Miss Price. I'll be there."

She recoiled from the savagery in his voice.

"But you must have some idea. I mean, you've had experience with other criminals—"

"That's right. I've had experience."

He got up with a sudden drive of the legs, and stepped over to the window. He drew back the curtain and looked out into the night, as if it had a fascination for him. He stood that way for what seemed like a long time, his face hidden from her. When he turned back, his expression was normal once more. The harshness was gone from his eyes.

"It's lonelier here than you'd expect," he said. "And very quiet. Perhaps too quiet. Do you like living here?"

"When you're alone, what difference does it make?" The bitterness in her voice slurred the words. "One place is as good as another. A book read here is no different from a book read in a library. The food tastes the same. The thoughts are the same thoughts, aren't they?"

She managed a smile. "And the rent's reasonable. What more could you ask?"

He nodded and changed the subject.

"If you want to go out, there's no need to change your plans. I'd rather you didn't, in fact. I'd like everything to be normal. I can always wait in the car until you get back."

She stared at him and suddenly her eyes stung with a sort of forlorn fury. She jumped to her feet, collected the cups and ran into the kitchen. She put the cups in the sink and ran the tap noisily, as if trying to drench the sense of panic that was gathering inside her.

This man stood in her living room and talked of the normal things, as if he took it for granted that she would be doing them. And why not? If he weren't saddled with her, and with this job, he'd be out doing them himself, wouldn't he? He had eyes. He could see. And he would see what her mirror saw, and with the same impersonality.

A face that could be described as attractive, a body that might be desirable, a woman who would naturally want to do the things that women did. She slammed her hand against the tap, and the noise of running water ceased. Then she put her head against the wall.

When she straightened up, he was standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry," he said, and his eyes were genuinely sad. "It never occurred to me."

"That there wouldn't be any place to go? That there wouldn't be anyone to go with? Hadn't you guessed that?"

He hesitated, frowning.

"No," he did. "It isn't something that shows on the surface. I didn't understand."

"It isn't your job to understand. It's just your job to see that a little man whose face I can't even remember . . " The words died in a sob.

Keyhoe slapped his hand against tht doorframe.

"Look, Miss Price," he said quietly. "No one is going to do you any harm. And you don't have to stay cooped up in here. There are plenty of places to go. But they're only available to the people who know how to find them and are willing to look. You don't find them in one room."

"And if you're a woman you don't find them by yourself," she flared.

He studied her for a moment. Then he nodded abruptly and walked back into the other room. She heard the dial of the phone spinning in short, vicious arcs. His voice murmured. The phone clicked.

He came back and said, tersely, "Get your coat. We're going out."

"But . . ."

"Miss Price," he said, with a gentleness that sounded dangerous. "Let's not argue about it. Let's just say you were going out any-

way. As far as the police department is concerned, you shouldn't go alone. So I go with you. Is it any easier for you to take, put that way?"

She nodded dumbly.

"If you'll just wait . . . in the hall . . ."

The door closed behind him and for a brief moment she clung to the edge of the doorframe, resting her head where his hand had been. She felt weak and ashamed and nearly furious. She felt shameless, as if she had picked him up on a bus or in a bar. But when she went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror, her mouth was trembling on the edge of a smile.

In the hallway, Keyhoe was waiting for her, smoking a casual cigarette. His eyes noted details as she came out. She had rearranged her long hair so that it clustered fully about the nape of her neck, and her best hat was worn at a jaunty angle.

She went toward him gladly, hoping that he wouldn't notice the faint smell of mothballs that clung to the coat she hadn't worn in more than a year. She seemed a different woman, so different that when they walked down the stairs together, the man waiting in the shadows at the back of the hallway on the ground floor found nothing in her appearance to jog his memory.

He waited until the door had closed behind them. He waited until the echo of their footsteps had died away. Then he came out into the light, adjusting the angle of the black homburg almost nervously.

He stood in the hallway, his eyes searching the row of names above the mailboxes through thick, pebbled lenses.

Then he went softly up the stairs to the first landing and pressed his ear against the door marked Lynn Price. His fingers, black-gloved, touched the knob and turned, but the door resisted pressure.

Mr. Strachey drew back. No light shone under the door, yet it was only eight o'clock. Lynn Price wasn't in. The hour for her had not yet come.

He raised his head and directed his gaze up the dark stairs to the landing above. Then he put one hand on the railing and slowly began the ascent to the second floor, and the room where Marlene Dalys lived . . . and was soon to die.

V

LYNN RAISED her glass and studied Jimmy Keyhoe over its rim. A warmth was rising in her that had nothing to do with two highballs. There was a small, glowing core of pleasure inside her that clamored for expansion, so that the dim, crowded room with its mockery of atmosphere seemed inti-

mate and cosy, and somehow, a romantic challenge.

She drank, letting the liquor idle on her tongue before it slid down her throat. This, she thought, is how a spring flower feels at the first touch of the sun. And because the idea was so ridiculous, she laughed aloud, and Keyhoe, not understanding, smiled in return.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," she said warmly, "I am. I didn't think I would, somehow. I practically forced you into this, after all."

"My arm twists easily," he said. "But I'm probably a dull companion. This sort of thing isn't much in my line."

"What do you usually do in the evenings, then? Curl up with a good clue?"

He winced. "Why don't you forget I'm a policeman, just for the time being?"

"Why should I? Do you, very often?"

"Not often," he admitted.

"Don't you ever want to?"

"No. No, I don't think I do."

"You mean it's more than a job to you."

"You could put it that way." He leaned forward to light her cigarette, his slim, strong fingers touching her hand.

She settled back in her seat and smiled at him.

"Why don't you just tell me to mind my own business "

He waved the smoke away from his face. "I'm minding yours. Perhaps that gives you the right to mind mine."

"All right," she said. "That's fair enough. Just what kind of a business is yours? Oh, I don't mean the mechanics of the thing. I mean, why do you do it?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Would you believe me if I just said that somebody has to do it?"

"I'd believe you, but I wouldn't be very impressed. And you wouldn't be telling the whole truth."

He laughed. "You're direct, aren't you? And quite right. You know, it's a funny thing, but I've never tried to put it into words before. There hasn't been any need."

"Don't try, unless you want to."

"I think perhaps I do. You see, to some people being a cop is something that stretches just a little beyond their imagination. We're necessary evils, like smallpox vaccinations or income tax.

"You could almost say that we're like collectors of human garbage. We never know what we're going to find when we lift the lid and look into the can. There has to be somebody who's willing to clean up the mess, I suppose. But there's more to it than that. Cops are formed when they're kids. They grow up into it. Some of them grow straight and good, like Bering. Others grow mean and crooked, like stunted trees."

He was faintly embarrased.

"With me, well, it was sort of an idea I had when I was pretty young, and it sounded just as silly then as it does now."

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and smiled at her, half-mockingly.

"What sort of an idea?" she asked. "I'm serious. I'd like to know."

"Why? I'm just a passing phase in your life. I'm here tonight, and tomorrow there'll be another cop watching you and talking to you, and the day after that, perhaps another. We come and go."

"And if I'd like you to stay?"

He considered her gravely. "That would be a mistake. The sort of a mistake one lonely person can make with another, but still a mistake."

Impulsively she put out her hand and touched his.

"But why? What's wrong with it? Can't two human beings enjoy being together without . . . without all sorts of complications and reservations and conditions?"

"I'd say that depended on the two human beings. Look, Miss Price . . . Lynn . . . we have known each other about two hours. It takes longer than that to read a good book."

She withdrew her hand, and smiled, ruefully.

"Well, I asked for that, didn't I? Lynn Price, professional hussy."

"I didn't say that, and I didn't mean that. I know you better than you think. But you don't know me."

"And it looks as if I'm not going to get the chance."

He shifted in his chair. In that moment, his eyes were caught off guard and she saw something in their depths that made her wince. It was as if, in that moment, a little light had filtered through a drawn shade into a dark room, a room in which remorse and sorrow and terror lived together.

Because she had been so long alone, she recognized at once, and her own desolation reached out toward him . . . and stopped.

He was laughing, softly but without humor, and his eyes were once more grey and hard and impassive.

"Let's stop sounding like two initiates in a lonely hearts club. Would you like to dance?"

She lowered her head and said, in a muffled voice, "No thanks. I wouldn't be very good at it."

The moment was gone now, and she had a feeling that it would never come back unless he recalled it himself. The music was no longer remote. It was cheap and gaudy and blaring. The liquor tasted flat and the cigarette smoke hurt her throat, and suddenly she wanted to be away from there, even if it meant being alone again. Because loneliness would be preferable to this mockery of companionship.

"I'd like to go home," she said.

He looked at his watch. "It's only ten o'clock."

"Later than we both think, perhaps." She opened her purse and rummaged in it. "You've been very kind. I'll write to the Commissioner about it."

He sighed, raised one hand to the waiter, and paid the bill.

"I guess I won't win any medals as the considerate cop."

"You need cooperation to be considerate. Please forget it. I'm a little ashamed of myself for taking a running jump into your life. I had no right to do that, without an invitation."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's quite all right. You've given me a nice evening and I've given you nothing but trouble. Please take me home."

They rode back in silence, inches apart on the seat, but miles apart in their thoughts. She leaned her head against the window, feeling the glass cool and misty against her skin, and watched the street lights flicker past.

People moved quickly on the sidewalks. Here and there they huddled in doorways, for the rain had begun again, and the whole night seemed to be weeping silently with her.

The taxi came to a stop in front of her apartment house and Keyhoe paid off the driver. Another car was parked across the street, its lights out. Keyhoe raised one hand to the man behind its wheel and walked her up the stairs to the front door.

In the tiny vestibule she put one hand on his arm.

"Good night, and thank you again. That was definitely beyond the call of duty. I hope it wasn't too much of a strain."

"Stop walking on your pride," he answered roughly. "Most of the people in this world are lonely inside, one way or another. They just haven't made a career out of it."

"Thank you."

"And don't be sarcastic with me. I'm an expert in it."

She laughed flatly.

"Don't you think it's time we called it a night? I don't want to fight with you. And your wife is probably wondering where you are."

His face was totally in shadow. For a moment he was utterly silent, as if holding his breath. Then he said, with a savagery that was like a blow, "I don't have a wife, Miss Price. Not any more."

He jerked the door open and a little rain blew into the vestibule. His shadow flickered unevenly across the steps as he ran down them. Under the light he paused to look back, almost unwillingly. Then he was gone.

Lynn leaned her head against the cold metal of the mailboxes and shut her eyes. There was a dank smell in the hallway, dank

and acrid and somehow bitter, trapped in this airless space.

She shook her head and said, "Damn," in a voice that shook and went slowly up the stairs to the first floor.

A dim bulb burned in a shaded wire cage in the ceiling. It cast a mean light. She opened her purse and began fumbling in it for her key. She had it trapped in one corner of her purse when she heard the sound.

It came from the floor above. It was a snuffling sound, as if muffled by walls and doors, a sound crying to be let loose. She frowned and stood undecided. Then she remembered the Pekinese that belonged to the woman who had the apartment above her. A tall, bony and hapless wench, Lynn had once described her, compensating for her loneliness by lavishing affection on a toy dog with an ugly disposition.

Lynn, turned, sighing at the necessity but somehow glad of it, and started up the stairs. The peke had probably been given his milk at the wrong temperature or was locked in a broom closet having a nervous breakdown.

The landing came into view. The door to Miss Dalys' room faced the head of the stairs, and as she reached the top a small, golden animal scuttled toward her, its tail down, whining with terror. It crouched at her feet, staring up at her with large, moist eyes. Its coat had an oddly bedraggled appearance, and it was panting.

Lynn stopped. Beyond the dog the door was partly open, a wedge of deeper darkness. She looked down. The dog backed away, wriggling on its belly, and snarling a high-pitched snarl. She half-reached down and jerked her hand back as the dog snapped at her.

Then it turned and fled, not into the apartment, but up the stairs in a scurrying run, its nails scrabbling on the treads.

Lynn moved forward a pace. She called out, "Miss Dalys?"

There was no answer.

For a moment she thought of going back downstairs and signaling to the two men who waited outside in the police car. But that would be the final humiliation and she didn't want to face Jimmy Keyhoe again that night. Or ever.

She reached out and gave the door a push.

It opened without sound and bumped off the wall.

Light from the hallway found its path across the carpet and climbed up the side of a chesterfield that stood along one wall. It found something else. A hand lay in the light, its fingers brushing the carpet, a hand that glittered as the rings on two of the fingers caught and reflected the light.

Lynn's breath jammed in her throat. Her voice, when it came, was high-pitched, like a schoolgirl's.

"Miss Dalys? Are you all right? Miss Dalys . . ."

She smelt it then, the same, peculiar and almost sickening reek of perfume, and recognized it for what it was, or had been. Someone had smoked an Egyptian or Turkish cigarette here, and the someone had not been Miss Dalys.

Without taking her eyes off the limp white hand with its glittering burden she reached around the edge of the door and fumbled for the light switch.

It clicked under her finger and filled the room with a yellow glow.

Only then did she scream. Because only then could she see the blackened, distorted face of the woman who had once been Marlene Dalys.

IV

LYNN REMEMBERED very little of the hour that followed. Men came and went, men carrying small black bags, men loaded down with cameras, silent men who carried a wire basket and wore white coats, as if they were delivering milk. For sixty minutes heavy feet scraped up and down the stairs, while she sat huddled on her day-bed with her trembling hands locked together around her knees.

Her door was open, and when the hour was up she saw Keyhoe passing by. He moved quickly, and in the dim light his face had a raw, scraped look, and his mouth was a bitter trembling line. He did not glance her way. The front door opened and closed, this time with a dismal finality.

Then Bering came into her room and closed the door behind him. He slumped down in the chair Keyhoe had occupied earlier that evening and stared at her. His eyes were red-rimmed.

She looked at him listlessly. She still could not believe that the silken cord had been meant for her. She found her mind skipping stupidly from one half-formed thought to the next, drawing no conclusions from any. She wanted to close her eyes, if only in self-defence.

But behind those aching lids the face of Marlene Dalys waited, grimacing, terrible, a promise of what might yet come to her. She could not face it.

Bering jammed an empty pipe between his teeth and chewed on it. For a long time he sat there, regarding her, summing her up. Then he slapped both hands on his knees.

"All right," he said wearily. "Let's get this over with. There's no doubt at all that he killed her because he thought she might be the woman who saw him. That means he isn't sure. That's the one hope we have. He isn't running on patterns any longer. He's killing to save his own neck, desperately. And desperate men make mis-

takes. But I'll promise you this. He isn't going to make any more. He isn't going to reach anyone else."

"That isn't going to help her."

He winced. "It's too late to help her. Start thinking about yourself. Look. He's made one mistake already. He'll make more. He left something behind, this time. I'm not sure it's any good, but perhaps you can help me. Did the Dalys woman smoke Egyptian cigarettes?"

"Is that all she means to you? The Dalys woman? Is that the way all your victims are handled?"

"Miss Price," he said softly. "If it makes you any happier, I'll go put some flowers on her grave. But until I do, let's just get on with the business at hand. Please try to remember that I'm trying to save your neck. Literally."

She laughed, a thin, ragged laugh.

"And Keyhoe called you good and straight. There must be something wrong with the man if he's that blind."

Bering got up. He came over to her, his shoulders sloping, his big hands hanging loose. He cupped one hand under her chin and forced her head up.

"I'll ask you again, Miss Price. Did the Dalys woman smoke Egyptian cigarettes?"

She shivered at the savage purr of his tone, tried to meet his eyes, and failed. She shook her head miserably. "No."

"Thank you," he said. He returned to his seat. "One other thing. Keyhoe tells me he brought you home about ten-fifteen. The squad car arrived here at eight-thirty. It was here all the time, after that. Which means that our man was either waiting in this building when we brought you home, or was hiding here when you and Keyhoe went out.

"Now. We don't know how long he waited, but he must have killed her before the car arrived, or he would have been seen leaving. We've got a man on the back. He's been there since this afternoon. What I'm getting at is this. If he smoked that cigarette, some trace of it would remain. It's a pretty pungent brand. Did you smell anything when you went up to her room?"

"Yes," she said indifferently. "I remember wondering about it just before . . . just before . . ."

"All right," he growled. "But no more emotional outbursts. Please. There isn't time. You see, we've got the butt. He dropped it and put his foot on it. And that wasn't very neat. Because it's a type of Egyptian cigarette that isn't known in this country at all. He must have ordered them specially. A fastidious type."

He smiled viciously. "Maybe smoking it was part of the ritual of killing. But whatever it was, it may hang him. Now. Can you remember anything else?"

"No." She rubbed her forehead and winced at the pain in her head. "No. I just came in and heard the dog whining and went upstairs to see why. I've told you all about that. What else is there to say?"

He leaned back in the chair and let his arms hang over the sides. "There's one other thing." He let the sentence hang in mid-air, as if considering it from all sides before dropping it into her lap.

"Go on," she said.

"About Keyhoe."

"What about Keyhoe?"

"Leave him alone," he said carefully, "unless you can do him some good. And I don't think you can."

She raised her head then, and her mouth was tight.

"Is this just a part of police routine, inspector? Or is it something else again?"

"It's part of my police routine. I'll put it straight to you. You're a lonely woman, a damn lonely woman. And don't try to tell me any different. I know the signs. I've looked at the books you read. I've looked at the place you live in. Not a man in sight, except that youngster in the frame over there, and the date on that picture is ten years old.

"You're lonely and bored and frustrated, and a good-looking kid like Jimmy comes into your life and you think, maybe, at last, here's the big chance. Understand

me, Miss Price, there's no chance at all. You're just wasting your time."

She stared at him, the blood rising in her face, her mouth half-open.

"Why you presuming old man. . . ." she began, in a strangled voice.

Bering grinned, wickedly.

"Sure. I'm an old man. But a smart old man, Miss Price. A smart old man who needs a smart young man, like Jimmy. I need him too much to throw him over to you, like a consolation prize for all the years you've wasted. He's had enough trouble with one woman. I intend to see that he doesn't have any more."

Bering paused, the smile fading. "It's bad for business, Miss Price. His business and mine. If he hadn't been out with you, that woman upstairs would still be alive. Or had you thought about that?"

She was almost stammering with fury, but there was something in Bering's face that dammed the flow of bitter words bubbling in her throat.

"Whose idea was it?" he asked. "Did he ask you to go out? Was that it?"

She covered her face with her hands. The room seemed to be revolving with a pitching motion, and she wanted to be sick. But she managed to shake her head.

"No. It was . . . my idea. I forced him into it. I just couldn't stand being here any more. Not tonight."

"Go on," he growled. "You're doing fine."

"What else do you want me to say?" she flung at him. "Am I supposed to feel like a criminal because I want a little bit of life, and he offered it to me, and I took it? Is that a crime, in your book? He's decent and fine, and you make it sound as if I'd seduced him into some sort of an affair. Who gives you the right to judge him like that? Who do you think you are?"

He smiled. It was a frosty smile, but still it melted the ice in his eyes.

"You like him," he said, and it was not a question. "I think you really like the kid."

"Yes," she cried defiantly. "I like him. He's a human being. He has feelings. There's something wrong with him, but it isn't the same kind of thing that appears to be wrong with you. It isn't a warped hunger to take charge and direct, to mould someone else into your own image. You don't want a Jimmy Keyhoe. You want a second Emmett Bering."

"Well, well," said Bering. "Is that what I want? I wonder now. Perhaps I want something quite different."

"Then name it. Just for once, try to behave as if you weren't some kind of a machine."

"Okay," he said, his smile no

longer frosty. "You pass the test. I rather thought you would. But I couldn't take a chance. I've been wrong about women before."

"You?" She laughed scornfully. "The Great Bering, wrong?"

He hunched forward, and pointed his pipe-stem at her.

"I want some help from you, and I'm going to get it."

"What kind of help "

"I'm not asking for myself, understand. I'm asking for Keyhoe."

She was silent, waiting.

He looked down at his hands. "There's a lot of pressure in this work, Miss Price. If it comes from outside, a man can handle it. But when it's inside, eating away like rust, he's on his way to being through. He's on his way to becoming a bad cop, and I hate bad cops."

"And just what is a bad cop, as you call it?"

"One who even thinks the way a cop shouldn't think. Honest, duty-dedicated cops are never wrong, Miss Price. Not in the long run. They're always right, because what they're trying to do is right. Doing it the best way they know how is right. Anything else is wrong."

"And that's your creed, is it?"

"No," said Bering. "That's my religion."

She looked at him thoughtfully. He seemed somehow older, sitting there with the pipe hanging loosely between his big fingers. There was a shabbiness about him, as if all the sharp, bright edges had been rubbed off. The last vestige of anger went out of her, and she made a helpless gesture.

"I don't know what you're driving at. Couldn't you just tell me?"

"Yes," he said wearily. "I'll try to tell you. A long time ago I met a kid who thought that there were only two shades of color in the world. Black and White. There was the white knight on a white horse, and he was right. There was the black knight, and he was wrong. It was so beautifully simple I almost cried when I saw it. The kid was Jimmy Keyhoe.

"He was fourteen years old. That was twenty-one years ago, Miss Price, and in that time I watched this kid grow up. I watched him grow into a man, and finally into a policeman, and I felt pretty good inside. But I should have known better. I should have known he'd take that black-and-white stuff into his work. Worse than that, he took it into his private life.

"He married a woman who wasn't much better than a tramp, but he thought she was a good woman in distress. Well, the distress part was true enough, but it wasn't the kind of distress a kid like Jimmy could do much about. He married her, and he carried the pedestal right up to the altar with him, and couldn't wait to get her installed on it.

"But she had slippery feet and she didn't stay there very long." He made an irritable face. "Hell, what right did he have to put her there in the first place? It was his mistake, not hers. She didn't become a tramp just because Jimmy married her. She always was one. But he never could learn that people are what they are, and that's the way you take them. You don't make them over. You just put up with them, or you drop them. Jimmy couldn't do that."

"What . . . happened to her?"

"I'm getting to that. One day she went off to Cleveland. She didn't come back. That was four years ago, Miss Price."

"She just walked out on him?"

He smiled crookedly. "She didn't mean to. It was supposed to be just a fling. It was her last. They found her in an alley one morning, with the life stifled out of her. Like that kid last night, like the woman upstairs." He spread his palms. "What makes it worse is that she was missing one stocking. Her killer had taken it with him."

"Then it was . . .?"

"The same man? Yes, I think so. She was like all the others. Slim and beautiful and young, with golden hair and a certain look. The Cleveland people tried to pin it down, but they didn't have any luck. They found the man she'd been staying with, but he didn't know anything about it. And we saw to it that Jimmy didn't discover what she was doing there."

"Then he still thinks that she was faithful to him? He doesn't . . . know?"

Bering shrugged massive shoulders. "Who's to say what he knew about his own wife? Who's to ask him? I think maybe he suspected, just a little. I think perhaps he just didn't want to admit that he could have made such a mistake."

"But he can't go through his life ducking a thing like that."

"He can't face it without help, either. But I'm not concerned with that, Miss Price. I'm after something a lot deeper than that. And a lot worse."

There was silence in the room. Lynn shook her head slowly. "I think we could both use a drink."

"We could," Bering said. He dropped the pipe in his pocket and found a cigarette, waiting until she had put the glass in his hand. He drained it.

"I'm asking a lot you may not want to do. I'm asking you to stop a man from killing himself. Inside. Where it counts. Because that's what Jimmy's going to do, if we let him. For four years, he's been living on hate—hate for the man who killed his wife. And that I can understand.

"I can understand it. But I can't let him do it. He's all wrong. He's after a killer, a lunatic, not as a cop, but almost like a madman himself. If he ever gets to this man

before the rest of us do, he'll kill him with his bare hands. It won't matter that he hasn't got the right to do that. It won't matter that he's taking the law and twisting it around to fit his own hate. He'll just kill, and once he does that, he's through. He's all washed up as a human being, and I'll see that he never carries a badge or a gun again."

He stopped and slammed the glass down on the table. His face was white.

"I'll be a little more honest. I don't give a damn what happens to this maniac. I think he'd be better off dead. But they haven't made me a judge yet, or a jury, and they haven't made Jimmy an executioner. Do you see now, what I want from you?"

Lynn closed her eyes.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "I don't know how."

"I won't take that answer," he said. "I can't take that answer. If you love the man . . ."

"But I don't love him!" Lynn cried out in protest. "I don't even really know him."

"Then, for the sake of God, try to look on him as another human being who's in trouble, who needs help, who's lonely and afraid. You can understand that, can't you? After all, it's not asking so very much."

She stood up and walked over to the window. A cold wind whipped back the curtains, curling them around her like a gauze shroud.

"I can understand that," she said to the dark night. "Yes, I can understand that. I'll do what I can."

Bering blew out his breath. His big body sagged in the chair.

"Thank you," he said softly. "I thought from the first I had a winner in you."

"I haven't won yet."

"No," he answered, getting to his feet. "And perhaps you won't. But it's a good thing to meet someone who's willing to try."

The door closed behind Bering, but still Lynn did not turn around. She could hear his heavy tread climbing the stairs, taking him back to sudden death and the horror that sudden death had left in the night.

VII

JIMMY KEYHOE was waiting for her the next morning, his face as grey and bleak as the new day.

She climbed into the car beside him and slammed the door. Without a word, he swung into a lane, reversed, and tooled the car back, the way he had come.

At the corner she made a small sound in her throat, and said, "Would there be any point in my saying good morning?"

He grunted. "Sorry. For me it isn't."

"Trouble?"

"You could call it that. Two murders in two days isn't very good police business."

"I didn't mean that," she said, and found that it was a strain to keep her temper with this man. His mouth was sullen and his eyes were dull. He had a beaten look that was painful for her to see. "I meant . . . about our being out last night."

He rammed the gear lever into first and let in the clutch. The car jerked forward.

"If I'd been there," he said in a thin voice, "the score would have been one, not two. Things like that bother me. Or perhaps I'm just too sensitive."

"Has Inspector Bering said anything about it?"

"Bering never says anything. He just looks. He just walks inside you and pulls away all the pretense and lets you see what you really are."

"And what are you, really?"

His mouth tightened. "Look, Miss Price, you mean well. But how about giving it a rest? I'm in no mood for the mother act this morning."

"Neither am I," she said, her anger slipping its leash. "You don't need a mother. You need somebody to kick the self-pity out of you. If I were a man, I'd do the job myself."

He swung the car over to the curb, jammed on the brakes and switched off the engine. Then he swung sideways in his seat. He was smiling, a grimace of the mouth.

"Now you go right ahead," he said softly, "and get it off your chest. And when you're all through I'll go on about my business."

"All right," she snapped. "I will. For all I care, you could work it out alone. But I've got an interest in this thing too, Mr. Keyhoe. I'm the one who should be running away and hiding in dark corners and doing the whimpering, not you. I'm the one whose neck . . ." She stopped abruptly. The words rang dully in the car, and involuntarily, she touched her own throat.

"Now look . . ." he began.

"No," she said quickly. "You look, and listen. You're all that stands between me and what happened to Marlene Dalys last night. That gives me an interest in you, Mr. Keyhoe, that I couldn't feel if you worked at it for fifty years. As long as you wear that badge, I'll keep that interest. When this thing is through—if it's ever through—you can go to hell, for all I care. Until then, suppose you forget that all the world's against you, and keep your mind on your job?"

Her lower lip was shaking so badly the cigarette skidded off it, but she managed to get it lit. The smoke stung her eyes.

Keyhoe was still wedged sideways in the seat. His face was very pale. She could feel the im-

pact of his eyes, but she refused to look at him. If she did, she would cry, and her outraged pride revolted against the thought.

"All right," he said at last, his voice toneless. "You've made your point, Miss Price."

The engine whined into life. He swung the car out into the early morning traffic and drove downtown to the Keefer Building where she worked.

He stopped the car, got out and opened the door for her. Above the sullen roar of passing traffic his voice was loud and harsh.

"You'll be safe enough here. I'll be back to pick you up when you're through. When will that be?"

"Two o'clock. Saturday's a half-day. You'd better phone me first."

"I haven't got your number."

She gave it to him and walked into the building without a backward glance. He watched her go. Then he shook his head and got back into the car. The red light on the two-way radio transmitter was glowing. He picked up the mouthpiece.

"Keyhoe here. Go ahead."

Bering's voice crackled with static. "Where are you, Jimmy?"

"Just pulling away from the Keefer Building, where the Price girl works."

"Good. Take a run over to Lower Eastman. The number's two thirty-one. Two, three, one. Got that?"

"I've got it. What's the pitch?"

"We've traced that cigarette butt. I've got the lab report on it here now. Egyptian tobacco, mostly. The part that isn't mostly is the part we're interested in." His voice faded and died and came back again, more strongly.

". . . hashish. Not much, but enough to give you delusions of grandeur. Now get this. The weeds are brought in by the Acme Importing Company. Narcotics are getting a copy of the report, so you'll probably have company. The man you want is Menderes. Take it from there, Jimmy boy, and be careful."

Keyhoe smiled, for the first time that day. It was not a pleasant smile.

"Thanks, Emmett," he said. "I'll be in touch."

He was still smiling when he pulled the car into the lot behind the building at 231 Lower Eastman and got out. He could smell the river, less than half a mile away. The district itself was quiet and deserted.

He walked around to the front and went into the sagging lobby. An elevator faced the door, with an old man teetering on a stool inside the cage. He was reading a comic book, his lips forming the words as he went.

"Acme Importing?" Keyhoe asked.

"Fourth," the old man said, equally terse.

The doors clanged shut, the cage gave a preliminary jerk, and began to ascend.

"You a customer?" the old man asked, his watery eyes curious.

"No," Keyhoe said.

The old man cackled. "Cop, then. Well, it's about time."

"About time for what?"

Slyly the old man dug him in the ribs with a bony finger. "Don't fool me, they don't. I know the signs. You want I should wait for you?"

"What for?" Keyhoe said, as the cage shuddered to a halt and the doors rolled back.

"I like excitement," the old man said, licking his lips. "I like to see 'em get it."

"Then go to a movie," Keyhoe answered. He got out of the elevator. The old man shrugged, but his face was disappointed.

"Suit yerself."

Keyhoe waited until the cage had crawled down out of sight. Somewhere in the distance a typewriter clicked, the echoes clattering along the deserted corridors. He walked toward the sound.

Outside a door marked *Acme Importing Company,* he stopped. Beyond the frosted glass the typewriter stuttered on, driven by uncertain fingers. He put one hand on the knob and twisted. The door swung open.

In the cramped space beyond a low railing a fat, sloppily-dressed girl in a soiled white blouse was crouched behind a desk, working the machine with one hand. Her mouth was partly open. She looked up as Keyhoe came into the office. Beside the girl there were two other desks, some hooded machines and, against the far wall, a stack of wooden crates bound in wire tape.

The girl's hand hesitated, then fell into her lap.

"Yes?" She said in a high, nasal voice. "You want something?"

"I want Mr. Menderes."

"Why?"

Keyhoe's eyes flickered, but his tone was soft and polite.

"Suppose you let me tell him, personally?"

The girl shrugged. "Over there," she said, and jerked her thumb toward a door at the far end of the room.

"Thanks," Keyhoe said. He opened the gate in the railing and walked toward the door, moving soundlessly. In flaking black paint, small letters said that the office belonged to *J. Menderes,* WALK IN.

Keyhoe walked in.

Mr. Menderes was sprawled on the base of his spine in a swivel chair that teetered uncertainly under his short, thickset body. His feet were up on the desk, the trouser legs hiked back to reveal plump, white calves. He wore yellow socks and blue suede shoes.

Keyhoe closed the door and put his back to it. He unbuttoned his topcoat, and then his jacket.

"Mr. Menderes?" he said pleasantly.

The fat man's feet skidded off the desk and thudded to the floor. He spun around in the chair, his hands going out to balance himself. His olive face was startled. He stared at Keyhoe with round black eyes, and then decided to try a nervous smile.

"Come right in," he said. "Don't bother to knock."

"I have, and I didn't," Keyhoe said.

"All right, all right," the fat man growled. "So now you're in, what do you want?"

"Information."

"I don't import information. Try somewhere else."

Keyhoe shook his head, almost lazily.

The fat man lidded his eyes.

"Look," he said thickly, "don't play around with Menderes. Who sent you, anyhow? Who's boy are you?"

"The Thirty-fifth precinct," Keyhoe said. "Does that answer you?"

"A cop," Menderes said in disgust. His eyes went insolently up and down the length of Keyhoe. "A well-dressed cop. Okay. I should have guessed it. We don't import nothing the cops would be interested in. Why don't you go home?"

"I like it here," Keyhoe said. "And you do import something that interests us. An Egyptian cigarette. It's called the Ptolemy. Real Egyptian—not American brand name Egyptian. A round, white, fat cigarette—something like you, Mr. Menderes. Where do you get them from?"

Mr. Menderes worried his full lower lip with his teeth for a moment. His eyes became sly.

"Why should I hide things from you? I got nothing to be worried about."

"Then stop worrying and tell me."

"All right, all right. We get them from a man named Makroupolos in a place called Athens. You heard of it?"

"I've been there."

"A nice town," said Mr. Menderes.

"We'll talk about the town later. What about the cigarettes?"

Mr. Menderes shrugged. "What about them? They cost five bucks for twenty, but if you got the taste for them, you're out of luck. I don't import them no more. I don't do business with this Makroupolos no more. A bum and a thief."

"When did you stop?"

"A month ago? Six weeks? I don't remember. There wasn't much demand."

"Why not?" said Keyhoe. "Are the boys buying American for their kicks now?"

"A riddle," said Mr. Menderes. "I got no time for riddles. You go away now. I got nothing more to say."

"You're wrong," Keyhoe said, "so very, very wrong." He leaned forward a little, his coat falling open to expose the butt of his service revolver, snugged in tightly against his left side.

Mr. Menderes looked at the gun as if it fascinated him.

"Who did you sell them to?"

Mr. Menderes thought. It brought the sweat out on his greasy forehead.

"Look," he said at last, "I'll make a deal with you. You look like a smart fella . . ."

"You want your face slapped?" Keyhoe inquired softly.

The fat man's smile became ghastly.

"They went out by mail."

"Where?"

"I got a list . . ."

"Give it to me."

Mr. Menderes looked toward the window, and then toward the door. He got reluctantly to his feet. His head swiveled sideways.

"The list," Keyhoe repeated. "Now."

Mr. Menderes sighed, raised his hands in a gesture of resignation, and opened his desk drawer.

Keyhoe uncoiled like a whip. He slammed his heels back against the door and flung himself forward in a dive that sent the fat man sprawling over his swivel chair and into a filing cabinet against the wall.

The gun in the fat man's hand bounced high in the air, slammed off the wall, and went off with a shattering explosion. Keyhoe got both hands around the fat man's throat. They were both on their knees, facing each other.

The fat man writhed. His breath shrieked in his throat and bubbled in his nostrils. Slowly, he arched backward under the terrible thrust of those hands. His spine cracked with the strain. His heels began to beat a frenzied tattoo on the floor.

Keyhoe's fingers relaxed. The fat man fell over backward, smashing his head against one leg of the swivel chair. He rolled over on his back. His face was congested, the eyes bulging.

Keyhoe backed away from the man on the floor. He drew in a deep, slow breath, pausing just long enough to make sure that the fat man would soon be himself again. Then he bent over and picked up the fat man's gun and dropped it into his pocket, and opened the office door.

The outer room was empty. A sheet of paper still fluttered in the typewriter, caught by the draught from the open front door. There was a clatter of high heels, receding into the distance.

He closed the door and turned back to look down at Menderes.

"All right," he said in a voice that he did not recognize. "You'll live. Get up."

He reached over, caught the fat man by the lapels, and hauled him

to his feet. Mr. Menderes staggered. His face was the blank, shocked face of a man caught in a sudden explosion. He fell back into one corner of the room, one hand clutching his throat.

Keyhoe ignored him. He pawed through the open desk drawer, but there was nothing in it besides unpaid bills. He slammed the drawer shut.

"Where is it? Come on, produce. Or do we start all over again?"

Menderes made a weak, sick sound in his throat.

"Okay," he whispered painfully. "Okay. I'll tell you. There ain't no list. I had five distributors. I shipped the stuff out every week. A month ago we stopped. Like I told you, the stuff wasn't coming through. There wasn't no market. So I was looking for a new line."

Keyhoe nodded. His mouth was tough and hard, but his eyes were sick.

"Go on."

"The last load went to a guy at a drop downtown. Man named Pelling. He's at the news-stand in the Keefer Building. He had a little guy there who bought them steady. He was kicking . . . Pelling, I mean . . . on account of this guy was a good touch and there wasn't no more supply. He sold him the last tin a week ago."

"The Keefer Building," Keyhoe said, and his face darkened. "What was this little man's name?"

"How the hell do I know?" Menderes rubbed his throat. His small dark eyes gleamed with hate, but it was a careful hate. "I'm just the wholesaler. I don't handle the customers."

"You sure don't," Keyhoe said, picking up the phone. "From here on in you don't handle anything."

He spun the dial, and while he dialed he watched Mr. Menderes and realized that for the first time in his life he had almost killed a man with his bare hands.

VIII

BERING WAS waiting downstairs in the second car. As the first, carrying Menderes and two officers of the Narcotics Squad, pulled away, he turned to Keyhoe.

"I'm sending you over to see Pelling," he said, around his pipestem. "But if you get anything out of him, call me before you do anything about it."

Keyhoe nodded. His eyes were still sick and afraid, as if for the first time in many years they had actually turned inward, and looked upon the man who really lived there. He thrust his hands into his pockets, so that their unsteadiness would not betray him, and leaned against the side of the car.

"It may not lead anywhere. Menderes could be lying. Or it could be the wrong little man. There are thousands of them in the world. The one who buys exotic cigarettes for a private kick

could be just another of them."

"But we have to find out," Bering said.

"Sure," Keyhoe answered. He drew a deep breath. "We have to find out."

Bering eyed him. "You almost sound as if you'd rather not. What's wrong with you, kid?"

"Nothing," Keyhoe said, scowling. "I just had a little trouble, that's all."

Bering tapped his pipe on the steering wheel. "I thought Menderes looked sick. He pull a gun on you?"

Keyhoe nodded wearily.

"It's not the first time somebody's done that to you, Jimmy. What makes this time so special?"

"There wasn't anything special about it." Keyhoe's voice was thick. "Why not let it drop?"

"You nearly killed him, didn't you? What stopped you?"

"I didn't say I nearly killed him. And if I had, what then? He was trying to kill me."

"Sure," Bering said slowly. "Sure, kid." He looked down at his hands, and his eyes were not happy.

"Is there anything else?" Keyhoe asked.

"Only one thing. I want to give you some advice. It's a bad thing to do, and I don't like doing bad things, but this one's got to be put into words."

Keyhoe stiffened.

"You're a good cop, Jimmy," the older man said. "You can be the best. If you don't make any mistakes. There are a lot of mistakes in our business, just waiting to be made. There a hundred guys, just waiting to make them. Don't be one of them, kid. Don't lose your head over this thing. I want you to bring this man in, Jimmy. I want him all in one piece. I don't want him with a bullet out of your gun in him. I don't want any stories about self-defense, unless you've a damned good reason to believe it's his life or yours. You've got to be one hundred percent sure."

He paused, and looked directly at Keyhoe for the first time since he'd started speaking. "There's one other thing. Remember what I've always told you. He'll be a prisoner. He won't belong to you or to me. He'll belong to the Law."

Keyhoe smiled bleakly.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks for the advice, sir. I'll keep it in mind . . . if I find him."

Bering's mouth twisted in what might have been pain.

"I'll try to keep him in one piece," Keyhoe continued, in his soft, lifeless voice. "When I come up to him, if I do, I'll think about what you've just told me. I'll look at him and I'll forget all the women he's slaughtered, including my own wife. I'll forget all the misery he's brought, and I'll reach for my handcuffs and ask him to come along quietly."

He bent forward, peering into Bering's face.

"But what happens, sir, if he doesn't come along quietly? What happens if he pulls a gun on me, as that fat slob did upstairs? What happens if he tries to run away, inspector? Is there a chapter in your book that covers that?"

Bering reached forward and started the car. The motor throbbed unevenly in the silence of the street.

"I'd like to answer that for you, Jimmy. But there aren't any more answers for you, unless you find them yourself. Look hard, kid. Take a good long look inside. I hope you like what you see."

He swung the car away in a screeching arc, and was gone.

Keyhoe shoved his hands savagely into his pockets. For a long time he stood there, rocking a little on his heels, staring after Bering's car until it turned a corner blocks away and was lost to sight.

Slowly, then, he turned and walked around to the parking lot behind the building. He climbed in behind the wheel, twisted the key, and slammed into gear, reversing out of the lot in a furious, blind rush.

Too late, he caught a glimpse of the truck hurtling down the street toward him. His foot jammed on the brakes, the car slowed with a screech of rubber, and then the truck struck him. There was a grinding crash, an impact that flung him toward the windshield as the radiator violently ground its way through metal and glass, clawing like some savage beast toward him. There was one last moment of consciousness. And then a blinding darkness.

ON THE TENTH floor of the Keefer Building, Lynn Price was just ripping the last page from her typewriter and stacking it with the others. The clock on the office wall pointed to one-thirty. The building was absolutely silent now. Only a few people worked there on Saturdays, and the last of them had gone. She stared at her short-hand notebook, snapped it shut, and took the completed letters into the president's office for signing on Monday morning.

A little sunlight found its way in through the windows and trapped the dust motes on the quiet air. She closed her typewriter desk, lit a cigarette, and poured herself a drink of water from the cooler in the corner.

Keyhoe had not called. The phone sat mutely on her desk. She sat down beside it and smoked the cigarette, thinking about Keyhoe, and what Bering had said about him.

She had a hopeless, trapped feeling. Keyhoe lived in another world, a world in which the lights and shadows were of a peculiar intensity, a world into which she had never entered and could not,

without help. She wasn't even certain that she wanted to. If there was nothing else in loneliness, it at least offered the boon of security. You couldn't lose much if you never took a chance. There was safety in avoiding every risk.

Her mind turned idly back to Steve, but his loss had been a rescue, not a desertion. For Keyhoe it must be different. He had lost far more. He had lost not only a woman he loved, but an illusion, and she knew instinctively that this was, for him, the most warping loss of all. For one brief moment she had looked beyond the polite smile, and the face that had been trained to express emotion sparingly, or not at all, into the mind that really made this man what he was.

She had been given one quick glimpse into the private room that lies beyond all expressions, that hides just around the corner from every smile. It wasn't enough. She could not help him, because he did not feel that he needed help. She could not give him security, because she had so little herself.

They were both incomplete people, both with the same deficiencies. Together they could contribute nothing to each other's needs unless they both changed.

She bit her lower lip. Keyhoe had filled his needs, after a fashion, with hatred. Her own emptiness could not live on that. Perhaps, after that one fine moment when intimacy and companionship had brightened an hour in the night, there was nothing else.

She got up, slowly, smoothing her dress, and walked over to the window.

Far below, in the street, a few cars moved like shiny beetles along the ribbon of road. Countless windows twinkled in the frosty sunlight, a million glass eyes laughing at her foolishness. She turned away, and the phone rang.

She snatched up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Miss Price?"

Her smile faded into disappointment. "This is Miss Price," she said.

"Oh, I'm so glad I found you in." The voice was fussy and prim, so that she could almost picture the man who used it. "I know this is a dreadful imposition, but we are neighbors and I thought you might be able to help me."

"Who is this?"

"Me?" said the voice, as if surprised. "Of course, I haven't told you, have I? This is Arnold Strachey, Miss Price. I'm with Corbett's just down the hall from you. The accountants, you know."

"Oh, yes," Lynn said. "What's the trouble, Mr. Strachey?"

"It's such a stupid thing I hardly know how to go about it. You see, I'm working on a very important statement, Miss Price. Closing out a big account, you might say. And at precisely this moment, I

find we have no staples in the office."

His tone grew even more apologetic. "I was wondering if you could let us have a box? Just until Monday, naturally."

"Well, certainly," Lynn said. "Send one of your office boys along."

"How kind you are," said Mr. Strachey. "How very kind. But I'm afraid there are no office boys, Miss Price. I'd come myself, but really, you've no idea how easily one loses track of figures in a statement of this kind. My mind is simply reeling with them, and an interruption might spoil the work of weeks. Would it be too much trouble for you to bring them to my office? I know it's asking a great deal, but I'll be here until midnight as it is."

"I understand," Lynn said, becoming impatient. "But I'm afraid I can't leave the office just now. I'm expecting a phone call."

Mr. Strachey breathed in her ear. "Dear me," he said softly, "that is too bad." Then his voice brightened. "But if you left your office door open, I'm sure you could hear it. And it would only take a second."

"All right," Lynn said resignedly. "But please hang up. My caller may be ringing even now."

"Thank you, my dear Miss Price," said Mr. Strachey. "You must really let me do something for you sometime."

"Yes, yes," Lynn almost shouted. "Now please hang up."

The line clicked and went dead. She put her own receiver down, shaking her head, and found a new box of staples in her desk drawer. She stood with them in one hand, looking expectantly at the phone. For some reason she could not quite fathom, the sound of Keyhoe's voice was becoming important to her. She willed the phone to ring, but it sat smugly on its pedestal, inert, insolent and silent.

She went out into the hall then, leaving her door open, and walked quickly toward the end of the corridor, where the firm of Corbett's, and Mr. Strachey, waited for her.

Beyond the opaque blur of the frosted glass, she thought she could see a small shadow, moving against the brighter light beyond.

She put one hand on the doorknob, turned it, and entered the office.

IX

VOICES BABBLED in the fog. Dimly, Keyhoe could make out the words, but they failed to make any sense. He tried to move his arms, but they were inert. He was conscious of a wetness on his hands, hot and sticky.

There was a great weight on his eyes, pressing hot, a hot finger of sensation trying to pierce his brain. Nearby, someone was breathing

heavily. It was an agonized, muffled breathing, as if that someone were in agony. It took him a little time to realize that the breathing was his own. He rolled his head from one side to the other, and the voices stopped, except for one.

That voice kept repeating, over and over like a record gone mad, "I couldn't help it. He backed right into me. I couldn't do a thing. Oh, God, is he dead?"

Keyhoe forced his lids open. He was lying on his back, and the bright eye of the sun almost blinded him. His brain recoiled from the pain. He turned his head away, and saw two legs, clad in white shoes, and white trousers. The cuffs of the trousers wrinkled as the interne bent over him.

"Take it easy now," the voice said. It was a professional soothing voice, that talked to life and death in the same matter-of-fact tone, as if both were one and the same. "You'll be all right."

Keyhoe squeezed his eyes shut, seeking refuge in darkness. His eyes were stinging, and he thought that he must be crying, like a child with a bruised knee. But there was no darkness in which to hide, only an intense light that flickered and grew. Somewhere, people had started talking again, but the truck driver was silent at last, and only one voice came through to him . . . a voice that had died four years before, in a dark lane, a voice that had perhaps cried, in those last moments, as he was crying now, before the darkness became forever.

But the voice wasn't saying the right things. It was laughing at him. It grew in volume, the laughter groping into his mind and twisting his sanity. It kept whispering, caressing him, until he knew at last that he could no longer deny it.

He cried out, "No!" loudly, clearly, so that the interne stepped back, startled.

But Keyhoe could not see him. He could see only the face of his wife, mocking him. He could hear only the last words she had ever said to him, the short, dirty words that had stripped away forever the illusion he had loved almost as much as he loved the woman who gave it to him.

She was telling him the things he had always known, and never admitted. Her body swayed with remembered seductiveness, young, inviting, urging him on, while the voice thrust him away into his own personal hell.

"Darling Jimmy," the voice whispered. "Poor, darling Jimmy. Did you think I'd wait forever, through all the long and lonely nights, while you walked the streets and played at being policeman? Did you really believe that, poor, innocent Jimmy?"

He beat at the voice and bruised his hands on the pavement.

"You never understood me,"

his wife whispered to him over the years. "Didn't you know that there were better men before you, and more interesting men since you came? Didn't my body tell you that, Jimmy? Did you have to see with your own eyes before you believed?"

A hand touched his forehead soothingly. It touched him as she had touched him, before he came home that night and found that his wife was not alone. He struck at the hand violently, and saw her fall. He saw her lying on the carpet, her golden hair spilled like honey on the rug, her face white and shocked. He saw her scrambling to her feet, pulling the torn dress around her shoulders.

He saw her expression go blank, and then her features blended into the peculiar composite of vulgarity, shrewishness and hatred that he loathed to think about. The words she spat at him were words out of any gutter.

The picture faded. He tried to open his eyes, but the past still held him in its grip, and the voice began again, but in another and different tone now.

"Jimmy," it pleaded. "You drove me away. If you hadn't, I'd be alive today. You owe me for that. You owe me vengeance, you owe me retribution. I want him to die, Jimmy. I want him to die as I died, slowly, horribly, screaming for air."

A door seemed to close in his mind, as it had closed the night she walked out. In the same moment he realized that he was sobbing brokenly in the street, four years and a thousand miles away, and that he was not alone.

He opened his eyes. The interne smiled at him, a smile of understanding that understood nothing.

"You've had a nasty shock," he explained. "You've had a pretty nasty crack on the head. Otherwise, you'll be all right. But you'd better take it easy for a while." As he talked his hands moved here and there, doing things with gauze and tape.

Keyhoe tried to sit up. The interne slid an arm around him and said, "We'll just get you on the stretcher . . ."

Keyhoe pushed him away. His eyes were still blank with the horror of the dream he had just had—the dream that came in the night, the voice that whispered in the lonely hours. He pulled his legs in under him, and brushed away the helping hand.

"Got . . . to get up myself," Keyhoe mumbled. He found a handhold on the side of the ambulance and crawled up the side of it, gasping, forcing back the sickness that pulled at his throat.

"Now hold it," the interne said. "You're in no condition—I must insist."

"Cop," Keyhoe said, in his strangled voice.

He could still feel the cord as it bit deeper and deeper into the flesh, the flesh he had loved as much as his own, the flesh that had almost been a part of him. He could feel it cutting off his air. He braced his back against the ambulance, and fumbled for the worn leather case in his pocket.

"Cop," he said again.

The interne's face changed. He turned and said to the crowd. "All right, you people. Clear out of here. This man is a police officer. Come on, now. Get going. There's nothing more to see."

He helped Keyhoe around to the front seat of the ambulance.

"You'd better let me take you downtown, sergeant. If there's anything important involved here, I can get through to police headquarters for you now. You want me to do that?"

For a moment, the way was open to him, and Keyhoe reached out for it gratefully. Here was escape. Here was an excuse for running. He was a sick man. He need never find the maniac who had killed his wife. He need never face that awful moment when the slow death of that man would mean life to him—a life free from that once-loved whispering voice, urging him on to kill. He almost did it. But dimly, formentingly, he knew that there was really no escape. And he could not face the rest of his life, wondering what he would have done when the time came.

"Never mind," he said shakily. The street had come to rest now. The buildings stood on their foundations. He wiped his face and tried to grin. "I'll be all right. I've got to do it myself."

"Do what?"

"Never mind. Take me downtown, will you? Keefer Building. What time is it?"

"Just after one-thirty."

"God almighty," Keyhoe whispered.

He clutched at the interne's arm.

"Get moving. Now. Fast."

"But we can't do that."

"You can. You will."

"You're not able to walk by yourself, man."

"Then I'll crawl. Now get going."

The interne shrugged. "All right," he said. "But don't blame us if you drop dead from a delayed concussion."

"Don't worry," Keyhoe said grimly. "I won't."

When the ambulance pulled into the curb in front of the Keefer Building, Keyhoe was able to get out by himself. He stood on the pavement, weaving a little on his feet, unaware that his coat hung in shreds and that there were streaks of dirt and blood on his face. He took a bearing on the front door, and made it without falling.

The lobby was dark and cool.

At its far end, a man who hobbled on a deformed leg was slowly shutting down the news counter. Keyhoe moved painfully toward him. His footsteps echoed unevenly on the marble floor. Before him, the news-stand swam in a grey light.

He stopped by a pillar a few feet away and jabbed his finger at the crippled man, who had stopped his work and was watching narrowly.

"You," he said huskily. "You're Pelling?"

The other man became still. He was tall and bent, with a thin, bitter face and eyes that reflected no light at all.

"Who's asking?"

"Menderes sent me."

The crippled man hobbled a step forward, his body bent, as if dragged down by the humiliation of his deformity.

"All right. What's he want now?"

"You're Pelling?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm Pelling. What the hell's the matter with you, anyway? Who are you?"

Keyhoe leaned his head back against the pillar.

"Police," he said, forming the word with difficulty. "I want you."

Pelling became motionless. His lack-lustre eyes turned this way and that, cautiously. He rubbed his hands up and down the sides of his trousers.

"Don't," Keyhoe said, with great weariness. "Please don't. There's nowhere for you to go. There's just here and now." He pushed himself away from the pillar, and staggered.

Pelling's face began to crack in the dawning of a smile that held understanding and contempt and a certain hope. He licked his thin lips.

"I told you," Keyhoe said. "Don't do it." His hand found the gun and pulled it free. It was a great weight, dragging his arm down.

"All right," Pelling said. "You make your point. I'll get my coat."

"Never mind the coat. All I want from you is a name."

"What name?"

"You passed the stuff to Menderes. One of your customers worked in this building. Small man, wore grey."

The thin man considered him thoughtfully.

"And if I say I don't know? What then?"

"You go where Menderes goes."

"And if I remember?"

"I'll be too busy to look for you."

The crippled man considered this, and as he did, Keyhoe looked through the sour bitterness on the aging face, and found only something to be pitied. He groped for hatred of this man. He could find only a weary contempt.

"Take your chance," he said. "It's better than nothing."

The thin man laughed harshly. "Sure," he said. "But you got to excuse me for laughing, cop. I never thought I'd get a break from your kind. Unless it was in the neck."

He turned away contemptuously, and reached for his coat.

"You'll find him in ten-fourteen. He's up there now. His name is Strachey. A little guy. He shouldn't give you much trouble, even in your condition."

He slammed the cash register open and scooped up money. Then he limped past Keyhoe, without a glance. The halting sound of his footsteps dwindled toward the back of the building, and were gone.

Keyhoe looked down at the gun in his hand. He could have stopped Pelling, finally, irrevocably. Instead, he had made a deal. A week ago, there would have been blood on the marble floor and the wailing of a siren in the air. Now, he bargained with criminals. Strachey had brought him to this. Strachey, and the hatred that swelled the veins in his neck and beat a drum in his brain.

He shook his head numbly and fumbled the gun away under what was left of his coat and began walking unsteadily toward the one elevator that was still in operation.

To the boy on duty he said, "I'll drive, kid. Go phone the Thirty-fifth precinct. Inspector Bering. Get him here, and quick. You understand that?"

The boy nodded vigorously, his eyes wide, and began running toward the nearest phone booth.

The car went up, so smoothly that Keyhoe wasn't even aware he was in motion. He leaned against the wall. His knees were buckling under him and the dim light in the ceiling swam before his eyes.

On the tenth floors, the doors swung back. Keyhoe put his hands against the wall behind him and pushed. His body moved. Ahead of him, the corridors stretched, shadow pathways shot with spears of sunlight. He began the long walk.

LYNN PRICE closed the door of Corbett's behind her. In front of her, the office lay vast and deserted. She called out, "Mr. Strachey?"

A sound brought her about. Standing just in front of the closed door, barring her path, stood a small, smiling man dressed in a black overcoat and a black homburg hat.

"My dear," he said gently. "It was so good of you to come. I was afraid you might change your mind."

Lynn took a step backward and bumped into the edge of a desk. Here eyes were large with the terror of that sudden knowledge.

For there was no doubt at all

now. He could change the coat and the hat, but he could never alter that smile, or the way he stood, or the consuming stare of those eyes behind the thick glasses.

"You!"

"Of course," he said. "Did you think I wouldn't come? You should have asked the others, my dear. They would have told you. I always keep my appointments."

He chuckled with pure pleasure, and drew his hands from his pockets. They were black, silken hands, and a silken cord dangled between them. He advanced a slow step.

"You mustn't be afraid of me," he said, in his caressing voice. "You aren't evil, as the others were. I can see the goodness in your face, behind the fear. You musn't soil that goodness by being afraid. You must cherish it. It is your passport into the delights we are all promised." He paused. His eyes glowed. "Come to me, my dear."

Lynn jumped to one side, and put a desk between them. Her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears that she could barely understand what he was saying.

"You could never forget me," he whispered. "You would always remember, and you would tell. You would be a witness against me. But you needn't be afraid. It is very quick. Just one brief moment of pain, and then blessed darkness, and blessed peace."

His foot touched the chair, and in a sudden spasm of rage he sent it crashing over on its side.

His eyeglasses glinted in the sunlight as he came around the desk toward her.

Lynn backed away, panting with horror.

"You're mad!" she sobbed. "You don't know what you're doing!"

He stopped, considering this, with his head cocked to one side.

"Mad " His laughter bubbled in the silence of the room. "My dear girl. I am sane. I see reality as it actually is. I see the need for expiation, and I achieve it. Is this madness? No, my child, that is greatness." His lips thinned. "Now, come here."

"No!" she screamed, and flung the box of staples in his face.

He threw up an arm to ward it off, but the flying sticks of sharp metal drew blood and an outraged cry from him. She ran then, stumbling in her high heels, flinging herself away in a spasm of terror.

He shot out a foot and she sprawled, bruising her shoulder on the edge of a chair, falling on her hands and knees with a shock that jarred every bone in her body. She heard the quick, savage hiss of his breath and tried to struggle up. But he was upon her before she could move, whipping the silken cord around her throat, thrusting his knee into the small of her back.

She flung herself sideways and he fell with her, his black hands waving like the antennae of some incredible insect. They rose before her face, the fingers writhing. She tried to scream, but the agony was too great. Her hands beat feebly on the carpet. Above her, his spectacles loomed like great gleaming eyes of glass. His face was a twisted mask of delight, the lips writhing back from the teeth, the nostrils flaring. With a final, despairing effort, she clawed up at him, and the gleaming eyes disappeared.

He cried out in fury as his spectacles crashed against the leg of a chair and shattered. One black hand pawed at his face, where her nails had raked his flesh. The cord slackened, and in that moment she dragged in precious air, air that burned her throat and seemed to tear her lungs apart.

She moved feebly, her legs trying to run while her body was still convulsed on the floor. But his weight had gone. She heard the scurry of his feet on the carpet, a muffled cry of fear, the blundering noise of his progress through the maze of office furniture.

By a tremendous effort of will, she lifted her head and saw Keyhoe.

He stood just inside the door, his back braced against the wall. His clothes were ripped and stained with blood. His face was streaked with dirt, his hair matted with it. He had a gun in his hand.

He moved away from the wall and took a wavering step toward the little man, who was still retreating across the office, his squinting eyes peering toward Keyhoe, his hand still up before his face, as if to ward off the blow he knew must come.

Keyhoe made it as far as the first desk.

"Come here," he whispered through clenched teeth. "Get away from that window."

But Mr. Strachey had miscalculated. He had backed into a corner. There was no long and easy step down into eternity. He crouched there, snuffling with fear. His hat had fallen off and his bald, naked face turned here and there, helplessly.

Keyhoe slumped down in the chair behind the desk. He put both his hands in front of him, holding the gun up. Mr. Strachey's face swung back and forth across the sights, like a moving target in a shooting gallery.

Lynn saw Jimmy shake his head to clear his vision. His lips moved. He spoke in a low, intense voice.

"Four years ago," Keyhoe whispered, "you killed my wife. Or one like you. Four years ago, you committed suicide. Now you collect."

Mr. Strachey giggled with terror. He pawed at his face. Then he began to sing, in a high, quavering voice. He was singing a hymn.

Lynn felt the nausea sweeping over her. She caught hold of the desk and pulled herself upright. Ten yards away, Keyhoe was still crouched over the desk, holding the gun in both hands, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the man in the corner. She saw his thumb hook over the hammer of the revolver and start to pull it back slowly, painfully to full cock.

"Jimmy," she cried out. "Jimmy! Please! No.!"

His head swung drunkenly, and she realized for the first time that he had not even been aware of her presence. His eyes were red-rimmed and haunted.

"Don't do it," she pleaded.

Keyhoe breathed unevenly. In the corner, the little man had sat down on the floor, hugging himself with both hands, and was rocking back and forth. The hymn bubbled on his lips, a low, horrible monotone.

Keyhoe twisted his mouth into a frightful grin.

"Don't do it?" he said wonderingly. "Why not? You've been telling me to do it for years, haven't you? You've never given me any peace, have you? Why change now, Alison?"

Lynn put one hand up to her throat. He wasn't talking to her. He wasn't talking to any woman who still lived in the world. He was talking to his wife. She tried to wet her lips, but her mouth was too dry.

"I was wrong," she whispered. "I didn't mean it."

"But you said it," Keyhoe pointed out with laborious logic. "For years, I've thought of nothing else but this one moment. I have to do it. Can't you see that? If I hadn't sent you away, it wouldn't have happened."

"Yes, it would," Lynn said, her voice breaking. "I was never any good, Jimmy. Can't you face that now?"

"Always good," he mumbled, and his head drooped. "Never understood you. All my fault."

"No," she cried out intensely. "It wasn't. The only mistake you made was in not seeing what was really there. Can't you understand? You asked too much. That was the mistake."

Keyhoe closed his eyes. His body was beginning to shake, but somehow, the gun remained steady.

"Alison," he said softly. "Poor Alison. I always knew about you, really. But I couldn't face it. Every time I took you in my arms, I knew, and I shuddered, and you thought it was passion. I cheated you just as you cheated me. I never . . ." He shook his head and opened his eyes, staring around the office.

Then recognition dawned in his eyes. He focussed his gaze on her, and there was shame and hatred there, and a terrible purpose.

"Get out of here," he said thickly. "Get out, now."

Lynn put both hands behind her, bracing her body on the desk, and shook her head dumbly.

"Then stay and watch," he said, and brought the gun up to eye level.

In his corner, Mr. Strachey simpered.

"For a moment," Keyhoe said, "I thought I was free. For a moment, I thought I didn't have to do this thing. But you tricked me. Isn't that it? You pulled a cheap trick on me."

"No," Lynn said, and she was sobbing now. "I didn't cheat you. I didn't trick you. Not the real Jimmy Keyhoe. I've tried to keep your wife out of this, but she won't stay out. She's in this room now, as evil as she ever was. She's everywhere you look, she's in everything you do. Why, Keyhoe? Why? Because you couldn't hold her? Because she ran out on you and you've been chasing her ever since, trying to recapture a moment that never really existed at all?

"Isn't that it, Keyhoe? Isn't that why you're going to kill this poor crazy animal in the corner? He murdered her. He cut her off from you forever. You can never go back, now, and correct the mistakes, or save your pride. You've just got to live with it. And you can't do that by killing somebody else. You'd only kill yourself."

Lynn choked on her words, and fought for another moment in which the gun in his hand would remain silent, for another second of time in which Jimmy Keyhoe would not pull that trigger.

"He killed her," Keyhoe said, as if that were the only phrase he had heard. "She would have come back to me. I could have forgiven her the past. But he killed her, and when he did that, he murdered everything."

The man in the corner began to weep, the tears running down his naked, ugly face into his open mouth.

"Oh, Keyhoe," Lynn said. "How could she ever change, with you? Have you ever changed? Have you ever looked away from yourself and your own hate, into the hearts of other people? Have you ever cared for anything but your own dreams and illusions? You're like a child that closes its eyes and gropes its way through the dark, smashing everything it touches, for fear of what it might see if it looked at the light.

"Take a good look at him, Jimmy. Take a good look, and then pull that trigger. I hope it makes you happy. I hope it gives you peace. But I won't run away. I'll stay and watch you do it."

Keyhoe stood up. He raised the gun in a hand that was unnaturally steady, a strong professional hand. Behind the gun, his face was beginning to fall apart, the features

blurring. His trigger finger moved a fraction. Mr. Strachey, in his corner, wept openly and without shame, as if he would never stop. The sound of it filled the room.

Keyhoe opened his mouth and ran his tongue across his lips. Then his whole face twisted. His gun began to shake. He dropped it on the desk.

"I can't do it," He whispered. "God forgive me, I can't do it."

He turned and blundered away from her toward the doorway, where Inspector Bering stood like a statue carved in rock, as he had been standing for what seemed hours. Keyhoe stumbled past him, without looking up, clutching the door-frame as he went. His footsteps slowly shuffled down the corridor.

Bering looked after him. His eyes were sick with relief and the sweat stood out on his face. Then he turned to Lynn, who had started after Keyhoe, and shook his head.

"Let him go," he said gruffly. "Give him time to find the rest of the pieces."

She slumped down behind the desk. Her fingers touched the gun, sudden death in six, quick installments.

"What can he find, now? Where can he look?"

"Into his own heart," Bering said and his voice was gentle. "The one place he missed all these years." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps, in time, he'll find room for you there, if you want it badly enough to try for it. That's sort of up to you, isn't it?"

In his corner, Mr. Strachey waited in the sunlight. He had stopped crying now. He was smiling instead, and staring happily at his hands.

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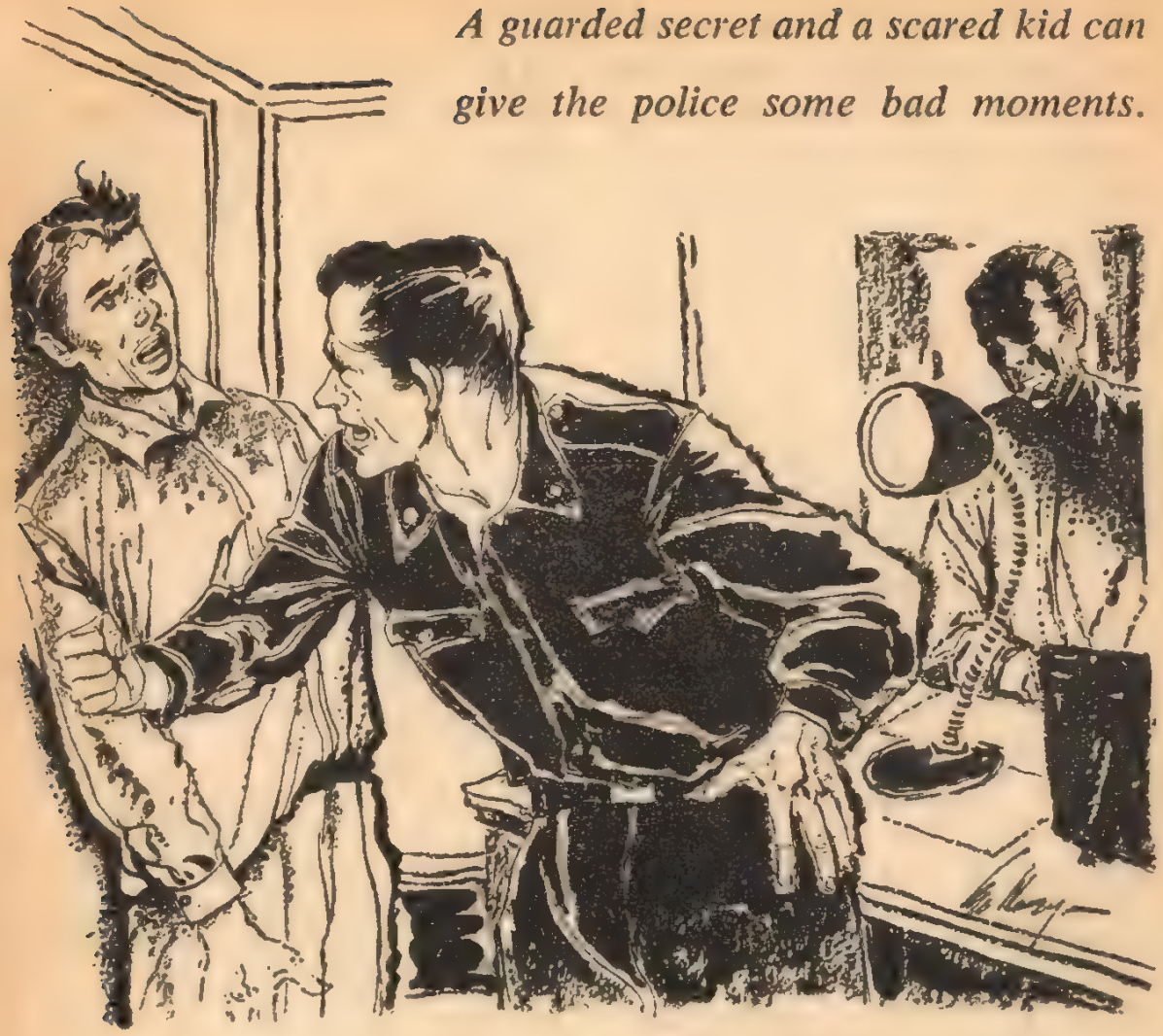

Stand Up Straight

by JOSEPH R. MARSHALL

THE NIGHTS WERE HOT, and I slept with both windows open to get as much breeze as possible from the river. Sometimes in the night I woke to the sound of the tugs pushing some barges downstream or the pulsing of a deep-laden tanker riding the tide all the way to Clinton. Gradually I got used to their noises and slept so

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soundly the first few hours that time disappeared.

But the boats often woke me later on, near dawn, when the fog settled on the river and they were using their horns. This time, when I awoke, I thought it was a foghorn I heard. It took me a few seconds to realize it was the telephone on the table by my bed. I reached out and uncradled the receiver.

"Johnny," he said. "You better get down here." It was the gravel voice of Morey MacAlister.

"Hello, Morey," I said. "What time is it?"

"They brought in a kid who thought he was tough enough to be a cop killer."

"I just got to sleep, Morey," I said. "I'll get it in the morning."

"This is a big one, Johnny," he said.

"Okay," I said. "I'm awake, Morey. What cop killer?"

"Two guys over in Milton. They shot a cop. We picked up one of them about an hour ago, and the captain's working on him now."

My bedside clock showed ten minutes after four. "It's pretty early for the captain," I said.

"He's hot on this one, Johnny. You want a story, you better get down here."

It was black outside. There was nothing on the river, and the lights of the auto bridge north of town glistened like beads of phosphorescence. I turned on the light and dressed fast, and drove crosstown the back way and parked in the alley behind the station house. I went inside.

"They're still working on him," MacAlister said.

"I need some coffee."

"You better get up there," MacAlister said. He pushed the handkerchief in around his fat neck. "Them ugly sons will never give us air conditioning."

"It's hot," I said. "You hear about the cop?"

"They put a slug in his chest. He's in the hospital over in Milton, and they said he'll probably be okay. But you know Captain Brady."

"About cop killers. You were saying—"

"The kid's nineteen," MacAlister said. "Better get up there, if you want a story."

"Thanks, Morey," I said.

I took the stairs two at a time and walked down the green corridor, past the city courtroom and the door with Chief Ulbrecht's name on it in gold letters, and when I stood outside the squadroom I could hear the voices. I turned the knob and stepped inside.

The room was hot and a smoky haze drifted around the spotlight. They had put a special bulb into the gooseneck lamp on Captain Brady's desk, and had turned the lamp so the bulb was aimed at the kid. He was standing against the

wall a few feet from the door.

Brady was sitting on his desk beside the lamp. He had pulled the shade down on the window in back of him, and his shoulder holster was on the desk. When I walked into the room. I could see the sweat mark the holster had left on his shirt.

Over by the metal lockers Joe Hanlon, the rookie, and Detective Lew Lowenstein were drinking coffee from cardboard containers. A wet bag was leaking onto the floor from the bench beside them.

"Who got you down here," Captain Brady said.

"That the kid?" I asked. "He talk yet?"

"All right," Brady said. "You walked in. Now why don't you turn around and walk out. This isn't City Hall."

"He's just a kid," I said.

Brady slid off the edge of the desk and walked toward me. He had been a tough cop and an honest detective and he spent one evening a week at the "Y" teaching the kids to box. He had been a good amateur himself and he believed in letting the boys learn by fighting. He turned out some pretty fair teams, and he had a name in town. Now he was waiting for Ulbrecht to retire, so the City Council could make him chief.

"He tried to kill a cop, Johnny," he said, "and he's over eighteen. He isn't going to any reformatory. Now why don't you go out and have some breakfast and we'll give you first break on the story."

"He's not talking," I said.

"There isn't any story for you until he talks," Brady said. "You've got plenty of time. If you go out and have some breakfast, maybe we'll have a statement when you get back."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I don't like his kind."

Brady looked up at my face, turned and walked back to the desk. "It may take a little while," he said. "You cross me on this one, Johnny, and it'll be the end. I'm asking you to go out and have some breakfast. You stay, and it's like you weren't here."

"I ever crossed you before?"

"You won't like it, Johnny. Why don't you go out for some breakfast."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll be working in Clinton a long time."

"All right, Johnny," Brady said. "But don't forget when you get over to the paper."

"I'm not here," I said. "I'm out having breakfast."

The kid's soiled white shirt was torn down the side, and he had rolled against the wall so that his face was turned away from the light. He had long brown hair, and young hoodlum type sideburns, and his eyes were shut.

"You know about him and his pal," Brady said. "They picked up

a car in Milton last night, and when they got caught they shot the cop. They tried to run over him to make sure.

"Hold up your head, punk," he said. "Let him get a look at you. You were real tough when you tried to kill a police officer in the performance of his duty."

The kid didn't move. Brady stepped forward and slammed his right hand across the youngster's face. The blow was so powerful it banged his head back against the wall.

The kid swung around and put his hand against the wall to steady himself. Then he pushed away from the wall and half raised his head. His eyes were shut and a big red welt was spreading slowly across his cheek.

"That's better," Brady said. "What happened to your pal?"

The kid rubbed his face with the back of his hand and his eyes flicked open.

"You better get smart, kid," Brady said, "because the smartest thing you can do is talk and make it easy for yourself. You haven't been very smart so far. You steal a car and you don't put enough gas in it. You stall on a back road, and you're just dumb enough to take a shot at a cop and then try to run over him to make sure he won't live to finger you. You lose your pal and you get lost. You were heading back toward Milton when we picked you up."

The kid didn't move. Brady shrugged and said, "Okay, maybe we should all take a break. You want a cigarette?"

The kid opened his eyes. They were blue, and he blinked against the brilliant light. Brady started to turn away on the balls of his feet. Then, without warning, he twisted and brought his right all the way around and slammed into the boy's belly. It knocked the wind out of him. He gasped for air with a hollow sound, and covered his stomach with his hands and wrists.

"That wasn't much," Brady said. "I can do better than that. Stand up straight."

The kid straightened and put his hands at the sides of his khaki pants as if he were standing at attention on a drill field.

"Maybe he's not so tough after all," Brady said. The telephone rang on his desk, and he turned off the spotlight. "You've got ten minutes to get smart," he said. "When the light goes on I'll show you I can do better."

He picked up the telephone receiver and listened. "Maybe we're in luck, Morey," he said. "Let me know if it turns out."

He hung up, walked around the desk and tugged at the shade to let it roll halfway up. He pulled open the window. It was just starting to get light, and I could feel the moist air from the river sweep into the room.

Brady slumped down in his

swivel chair, and for a minute he looked at the silver-framed picture of his wife and two daughters. It was the only thing on his desk that you couldn't buy in a five-and-ten-cent store.

"You want some coffee," he said to me. "There's some containers in the bag."

"I got one of the warm containers out of the bag. "Who do I owe?" I asked.

"Joe bought them," Lowenstein said.

"Forget it," Hanlon said.

"Did you pick him up?" I asked. Hanlon had joined the force that spring.

"Me and Roberts," Hanlon said. "He wasn't any problem."

"Where'd you get him?"

"They had a special call out on the car," he said, "and we were cruising down Powell Street. He came out of a side street. We caught him before he got to the light. He didn't give us any trouble, but Roberts found the thirty-two in the back seat and there wasn't any sign of his pal. So—we brought him in."

"What about his pal, Captain?"

"The troopers are still looking for him," Brady said. "They have a lead."

He got up and shut the window and pulled down the shade. "Maybe he grabbed another car," he said. "That's one of the things we want to find out."

The kid had opened his eyes. He was staring at some vacant spot in the middle of the room.

"He still thinks he's tough," Brady said. "He thinks he isn't going to tell us what happened to his pal.

"Lew," he said, "you talk to him. Find out what happened to his pal." He reached over and snapped on the spotlight. The kid turned his face away.

Lowenstein said, "Maybe he was trying to get home. Maybe he'd gotten himself into more trouble than he'd figured on."

The detective was tall and he stood slump-shouldered at the edge of the light staring hard at the kid. "Look at me, boy," he said.

The kid opened his eyes, blinked, and lifted his hand to shade them against the glare.

"The captain's right," Lowenstein said. "You'd be smart to tell us what happened. You and your pal could have taken the car for a joy ride, and then your pal could have panicked when the officer showed up. Maybe it was your pal who shot the officer, and all you have to worry about is a car theft charge. You tell us what happened in your own words and we'll take it down. The captain's a little riled, maybe, but you have my word nobody'll touch you if you tell us exactly how it was.

"Then we'll put you up in front of the judge and you can call a lawyer before they take you back

to Milton. That way the Milton cops won't get a chance to work you over."

He waited for a few seconds, and then said, "Hell, boy, I don't even know if you hear me. You don't have to say anything. Just nod if you hear me."

The boy nodded and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. The telephone on the captain's desk rang again. Brady picked it up. Lowenstein crossed through the light beam and turned off the lamp and the only light left in the room came from the dim bulb over the door. The boy opened his eyes. Lowenstein stepped close to him, and spoke in a whisper.

Brady put the phone back and motioned toward the lockers. "This could be good," he said as he came toward us. "The troopers think they have his pal. They were checking a call from some doctor on the North Road. A guy sought treatment for a gun wound, claiming he'd shot himself in the arm accidentally. But the troopers are going to bring him in."

"It's him, all right," Hanlon said. "The doctor's way out in the middle of nowhere, and he's got a sign out. It's the kind of place he'd pick."

"Let's see what Lew gets out of this one," Brady said. "He talks, and we won't have any trouble with the other one."

Lowenstein had been whispering to the kid. Now he stepped back and said, "Son, what about it. You tell it in your own words, your own way."

The boy shook his head.

"It isn't going to work," Brady said. "You can't talk to that kind of filth. He doesn't know what you're saying." He turned on the spotlight again.

Lowenstein reached out his long left arm and grabbed the front of the boy's shirt and twisted, pushing him savagely back against the wall.

"Where'd your pal go?" Lowenstein demanded. "Come on—talk!"

The boy didn't answer. Lowenstein lifted his right hand and slapped the boy's face. Without pausing he swung back and slapped him again on the other cheek.

"You lousy punk," he said. "We're not playing games. Talk now or by God you won't talk for a hell of a long time."

Then he swung his hand back and forth across the kid's face, banging his head against the wall with each blow, and continuing to twist the shirt front until he was almost choking him.

The boy gasped for breath and grabbed Lowenstein's wrist. Lowenstein hit him once more and let go. The boy stumbled forward, regained his balance and stood up. His eyes were closed. A ribbon of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth.

"Okay," Brady said. "He gets one more chance."

We all heard the siren at the same time. You could hear it come down Market Street, turn into the alley and slowly die out in back of the station house.

Brady smiled. "That must be them," he said.

He stepped close to the kid. "This is your last chance," he said. "The boys in Milton want you bad. You talk now and you'll get a lawyer and they won't be able to work you over."

The boy licked away the trickle of blood.

Brady cursed and drove his right fist into the boy's groin. He was a little shorter than the kid and he knew how to take advantage of the difference in height.

The kid screamed and crumpled onto the floor as if his bones had turned to rubber. He was sobbing.

Brady said, "I didn't hit him *that* hard."

He waited for the boy to stop moaning. "Get up," he said. "I didn't hit you that hard."

Slowly the kid pushed himself to his knees, and then he stood upright. He leaned against the wall and opened his eyes and peered into the light to watch Brady.

"You want to tell us what happened to your pal," Brady said, "or would you prefer some more like that."

The kid stared at him in tight-lipped silence and Brady shrugged and turned off the light. Carefully he twisted the gooseneck until the spotlight shone down once more on the top of the desk.

We heard the steps in the corridor. The door shot open and a big trooper in a gray uniform stepped in. "Here's your boy," he said.

Someone had pushed the new kid from behind, because he stumbled into the room and looked at the captain and at the three of us by the lockers. His tan sportshirt was too big for him and it hung outside his pants. There was a white bandage on his left arm. He held the injured arm with his right hand as he faced Brady.

"More cops," he said. "You cops organizing a picnic or just holding hands."

The trooper who had come in behind him knew Brady. "Sorry we took so long," he said. "But we had to let the doctor finish him up. He tried to play rough."

He shook Brady's hand. "He's been talking big, but I think he's right out of reform school. He panicked when they got caught in the car. He was driving, and from what he says he shot the officer and tried to run over him. He's been giving us a lot of talk about how we never would have picked him up if it hadn't been for his pal."

Brady nodded towards the kid.

"There's his pal," he said. "He hasn't been much help."

For the first time the wounded boy looked behind him to his left, and saw the kid. But before he could start forward the trooper grabbed him by the left arm just above the bandage. He screamed.

Brady moved in close and slapped him.

"Okay, cop," the youth snarled. "Let go of my arm."

The trooper released his grip, and the boy looked at his pal who had not moved. He said, "I'd be across the river by now if he hadn't chickened, and wanted to go back. He shot me because I wouldn't let him go back and help the cop. Then he dumped me out of the car."

"Take him out of here," Brady said.

The trooper said, "That's what I thought. You had the wrong boy here. He was with him, but this is the bad one. Maybe this time it won't be the reformatory."

"Hanlon," Brady said, "take him out of here."

"He won't get away with it," the boy said. "He shot me and I'm going to swear in court he wanted to shoot the cop and they'll send him up too."

Hanlon and the troopers propelled him out of the room, and Lowenstein slammed the door shut after them.

Brady went over to his desk and snapped the spotlight on and then off. He walked to the window and yanked the shade and let it spin all the way to the top. He opened the window and strode back across the room.

"I'm sorry," he said. He walked around the desk. "What the hell you want me to say," he asked, almost pleadingly. "It was the right car and you had a gun. You were with him when it happened. What the hell you want me to say besides I'm sorry."

The boy looked away.

Brady picked up the phone. "Morey," he said, "send a man up here. Have him clean up this kid and take him out for something to eat. Then book him."

He hung up and went to the window and stared out into the alley. The morning sun was bright and you could smell the river.

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A seductive authoress. A Los Angeles racketeer. Murder! And Mason hasn't a ghost of a chance of solving it!

3 The Case of the DEADLY TOY
Murder, mayhem and millionaires lead to a warrant for Perry's arrest—on a charge of kidnapping!

4 The Case of the CALENDAR GIRL
To save one client, Perry Mason builds an airtight murder case against Dawn Manning—then has to defend HER!

5 The Case of the FOOT-LOOSE DOLL
Perry's maddest murder mix-up of his career. His client may be hanged for her OWN MURDER!

6 The Case of the LONG-LEGGED MODELS
Even when murder gun turns up in her apartment, Perry's client still won't tell the one fact that might save her!

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